



柳内たくみ
Yanai Takumi

Illustration: 黒獅子

下

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GATE ゲート

4. 総撃編

下

自衛隊
彼の地にて、
斯く戦えり

Gate - Thus the JSDF Fought There!

– Gate – Jietai Kare no Chi nite, Kaku Tatakeri –

- Volume 8 -

All Out Attack (2nd half)

<Novel version>

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土煙を巻き上げながら
陸を埋め尽くすようにして
戦闘車両の群れが、

空を覆い尽くすように
ヘリコプターの編隊が、

驀進^{ばくしん}を始めた。
それぞれの割り振られた
目標へと向けて



CHAPTER 5

Night fell as the sun set.

The reed-like plants had their roots in the river and rose to roughly a man's height from the surface of the water. Imperial troops stared at them from their boats, paying attention to the rippling and splashing of water.

They reached out with their torches, seeking to shed the light of their torches on whatever was drawing near. But the lotus-like plants were like a curtain that prevented the light from spreading too far.

On a moonless night, the light of the torches made the piled-up weeds and sedge grass that surrounded the fortress even more visible. It was not uncommon to see these things clumped up everywhere, thanks to the current. For that reason, the troops could not study them for too long.

“Oi, let's go.”

In response to the somewhat impatient voice of his comrade, the Imperial trooper said, “I want to take a closer look, hang on...”

He leaned out from the boat, studying the darkened bank opposite him.

“Must have been a fish jumping, right?”

“Too loud for that.”

“So it was a big fish. If we stop every time we hear a splash, we'll be patrolling forever. Plus, there's alarms strung up around here. If we set them off by accident, we'll never hear the end of it from the vets.”

The fact was, whenever a patrol boat touched the alarm triplines, the soldiers had to waste their time falling in.

If they only did it once or twice, they could be forgiven for simply being diligent. More than that and the excuse would not hold up. In addition, this was the middle of the

night. Anyone woken up for a false alarm certainly have something along the lines of “Who’s that stupid motherfucker who set the alarm off” for whichever luckless friendly had done it.

Life in the military could be very complex. It did not pay to have the veterans’ eye on you, or perish the thought, their anger.

The Imperial soldier paused to think, and nodded to his comrade before turning away.

“Alright, let’s go.”

And so, the patrol boat with Imperial soldiers aboard continued to their next patrol waypoint.

Are they gone?

Kenzaki poked his head above the water’s surface, and gestured to the pile of weeds in front of him.

At a closer look, said pile of plant matter was actually a well-camouflaged face belonging to Matoi, painted in shades of dark and light green. The only clue that it was actually a face was the two white eyeballs within it.

Matoi scanned the area around him, and gave a confirmation signal.

“That was close.”

After patting his chest in relief, Kenzaki returned to his work near the barricades.

In truth, taking care of the triplines around them was not difficult. Neutralizing them followed the same principles as silencing a tin-can telephone; in other words, one had to hold the vibrating string in place.

Specifically, they would embed a bamboo rod into the riverbed and then run the tripline on top of it. After that, they could cut through critical parts of the alarm network. However, his hand had slipped and the rope had fallen into the water. That sound was what the Imperial troops had heard.

After verifying that the patrol boat was sufficiently far away, Kenzaki continued sawing through the palisade.

Fortunately, sufficiently waterlogged wood made hardly any sound when sawn through. Before long, he had cut through one of the logs that formed the palisade.

Still, the hole he had opened was only 30 centimeters across. In order for Kenzaki and the others to pass through in full battle gear, they would need to cut through another log, forming an aperture of 60 centimeters.

Kenzaki continued his work, and cut through another log.

He pasted a pale green fluorescent sticker on the parts of the barricade he had sawn through to mark it.

Everyone was in camouflage uniform, and their bush hats dripped with water. The M4 carbines they carried were not standard issue in the JSDF. Some of them did not carry guns, but bows instead.

Finally, Kenzaki surveyed his surroundings warily before giving Matoi the signal and moving in.

Matoi — who was tasked to stay behind — returned to his rubber dinghy hidden among the lotuses. After that, he peered through the night sight of his 50 BMG rifle and observed Kenzaki and the others as they advanced.



“Be more careful! Check out any movements you notice!” Centurion Borhos, Primus Pilus of the Imperial Army, bellowed at tonight’s sentries lined up before him.

“Even the sound of fish jumping out of water?”

“That’s right. You will root out and capture any fish who try to disturb us with all your hearts and souls.”

Perhaps they thought it was a joke, so the men laughed. However:

“What’s so damn funny? Huh?”

Borhos glared angrily at his men, his serious expression unmoved.

The laughter stopped immediately. Then, one of the new soldiers nervously raised his hand and said. "Commander... there's something that's been bothering me."

"What is it?"

"I just came back from patrol."

"And? Speak up, Trooper Terry."

"There's something I want to show you."

What the young man showed the centurion was a stick connected to a tripline. Several other lines trailed into the river from there. Terry brought his torch near one of them, and told Borhos to take a closer look.

"And what's the problem here?"

"The day before yesterday, I was tightening the lines so as not to get the alarms wet, so..."

"At a closer look, one of the lines was loose, and the part of the web it was secured to had sunk into the water."

"I see."

"At first, I thought it might have come loose over a couple of nights, but it would seem the same thing happened to other triplines. That was pretty weird, and it stuck with me."

"When did you discover this?"

"Just now."

"Good. Well done."

Borhos patted Terry on the shoulder in praise.

“Assemble all the duty sentries! The enemy has entered our perimeter! Notify the commander right now! This is an emergency!”



Much like the waterside, the sandbars were covered in man-height vegetation. Hidden among them was Oshino, peering through his night vision optics. He flashed a signal behind him to let the others know he had spotted the objective.

“There... Major Izumo, over there. The cage in the central plaza.”

“There” was a place roughly 200 meters from where Izumo was hidden. The cage was in the center of the plaza.

Still wearing his night vision gear, Izumo produced a laminated picture from safekeeping, using an infrared torch to verify the target’s identity before looking at the cage again.

“Cheh, I can’t see his face.”

The captured man lay down in the wooden cage. He seemed to be sleeping, and his knees covered his face, so they could not confirm his facial appearance.

“What should we do?”

“Stick to the plan. We assault after verifying that’s our man. Until then, we wait.”

“Still, if he’s sleeping, then he won’t lift his head until dawn. It’ll be light by the time he wakes up.”

“Our objective is to rescue the kidnap victim. Do you honestly think we can do something embarrassing like extracting a fake? We only have one chance to verify him, so take care.”

A tall team member peered out from behind Izumo.

“Boss. You basically need to wake up that guy, right?”

It was Delilah.

She was dressed in camouflage fatigues and disguised in the same way the rest of the team was. After covering up her ears with a bush hat, she was almost indistinguishable from the rest of the men. That said, the curves of her body betrayed her femininity. After all, no man had such an ample bosom or slender waist.

“Do you have something in mind, Delilah?”

Delilah produced a fish sausage from between her cleavage. She bit open the top, and then stood up like it was the easiest thing in the world.

“Leave it to me. If it’s going over there and waking him...”

“You can’t do that. Hang on, wait, hang on.”

Izumo and the others frantically tried to stop Delilah, who had already gotten to her feet.

Delilah was good enough that she could operate alongside the Special Forces Group. Her movements, alertness, awareness, enemy-tracking ability, close combat proficiency and other skills were superior to that of any man in the SFG. While she only used the bow and the sword, the need for noise discipline made them superior to firearms in the present circumstances.

Unfortunately, she had a fatal flaw.

That was to say, she did not fully consider the consequences of taking action. She had not acted independently, so there had been no problems there, but in contrast that implied that someone had to keep an eye on her and micromanage her.

“We have to hole up here. If we get close, we’ll end up as the proverbial fish in the barrel.”

(TL Note: the CN proverb is 瓮中之鳖. There's a story behind it, go Google it)

“That’s right. You need to worry a little more about your own safety.”

Kenzaki and Oshino scolded her for her carelessness. As Oshino had said, Delilah paid little heed to her personal safety. However, Delilah seemed to have something to say, and puffed up her cheeks even as she munched on the sausage.

“Still, didn’t we come here to rescue that person? We won’t do that by sitting on our butts here.”

Izumo lightly patted Delilah on the shoulder.

“That’s true. But charging in recklessly is a one-way trip. We can only take action once we’re sure that person is Matsui-shi. Until then, we have to be careful. Got it?”

“So that means it’ll be fine as long as I go, right?”

“Are you kidding me? ‘We’ includes you as well.”

“R-really? So I’m everyone’s comrade?”

“That’s how I see it, but do you think otherwise?”

Izumo nodded, followed by Kenzaki and the others. Delilah bowed her head and quietly replied, “I’m sorry. I didn’t see it that way earlier. I get it now. So as long as I don’t get close to him but wake him up, it’ll be fine?”

“That’s right. Well, as long as you can do it.”

With that, Delilah withdrew an arrow from her quiver. She did something to the tip, and then nocked it to the bowstring.

“Oi, oi, what are you doing?”

“Taking off the arrowhead. That way, he’ll wake up once I poke him.”

As Delilah explained her actions, she drew the string back.

So that’s it... seems a little rough, but for all we know, it might actually work.

Izumo studied the target through his night vision optics as he directed Delilah.

“Don’t hit the head. That’ll make a high-pitched noise.”

“Got it. I’ll aim for the shoulder or waist.”

Warrior Bunnies did not need night vision equipment to find their targets in the dark, probably because their innate night vision was very good. Then there was their enviable arm strength, which could easily draw a bow to hit a target within 200 meters.

Before long, Delilah had spotted her target. She held her breath for a moment, and then the bowstring twanged, sending an arrow forth.

A muffled impact rang out from the distance.

The sleeping male lifted his head in surprise, rubbing his sore shoulder and looking around fearfully in an attempt to figure out what was going on. As he saw that face, Izumo was certain.

“Umu, that’s right. He’s Matsui Fuyuki-shi.”

His hair was messy and his face was frail. His looks had changed dramatically, but they still fit the image of “what he would look like after being thrown into a cruel environment”.

The members of the SFG rose as one.

Advance and secure the objective. That was their aim. However, Delilah gestured for them to “wait”, which made them halt.

Though they had their doubts, they went to one knee again. They warily formed an all-round defense, covering their arcs of fire with their weapons as they waited for instructions.

Before long, they saw the reason why Delilah had halted them.

Soldiers bearing torches suddenly appeared, reinforcing the security around the cage.

In addition, they began deploying numerous smaller search parties, which started investigating the area around the plaza. If this kept up, the riverside where they were hiding would soon fall under their search radius.

“This is bad,” Izumo sighed as he realised they were being pushed towards a dead end.

“No need to worry so much. Time to assault,” Utsuta whispered.

Oshino replied, “That’s not all of them. If it’s just us falling back we could assault, but don’t forget the hostage.”

“That’s right. Dammit,” Utsuta muttered.

“What should we do?” Kenzaki and Imawano asked as they looked toward Izumo.

“Observe first. Why did all these guys pop up at once? I want to find out... Delilah. Listen to them.”

“Understood.”

With that, Delilah took off her bush hat and closed her eyes, her bunny ears standing up.

Her keen sense of hearing picked up the conversation Izumo and the others could not hear.

“Centurion Borhos, the men have been assembled.”

“Good. Once in position, begin a thorough sweep of the vicinity. Do you understand?”

Without Delilah’s acute hearing, Izumo and the others observed the enemy’s movements through their night vision optics.

Delilah told them what the soldiers in the monochrome images were saying, and so they learned about the enemy’s situation.

Soon, a bulky man who did not look like a common soldier emerged, and began speaking to the man who looked like the leader.

"What are you all doing up so late, Primus Pilus?"

The man speaking was probably a high-ranked official. The Centurion took on a keen bearing and replied, *"Sir, we have detected signs of enemy intrusion and we are tightening our security, Godasen-kakka."*

"-Kakka?" Oshino asked.

"Might be command staff," Izumo muttered.

"Signs of intrusion, you say. Were you the one who discovered them?"

"Yes, sir. Trooper Terry reported when he found something amiss with the triplines. I verified the abnormality myself and concluded that it was a sign of enemy infiltration."

"Are you stupid?"

"Have I erred in judgement, sir? My responsibility should have been to stay watchful against enemy infiltration and capture or destroy the enemy."

"Have you fished before?"

"I am a soldier, sir. I have not indulged myself in childish games like fishing."

"You son of a bitch, are you trying to pick a fight with all the people of Japan who love fishing?!"

Oshino seemed quite upset, possibly because fishing was his hobby.

"I thought you would feel that way. You see, I like fishing, In particular, I like bait fishing. I delight in seeing the fish flop around helplessly on the hook when they're caught. I like it so much that I often consider what sort of bait I should use to trick the fishies. Well, that's about how good my skills are. To me, you're making an amateur mistake. You place the bait on the hook and release it into the water. Then, the fish nibbles at it. Amateurs will immediately pull the rod up impatiently."

"Sir, you feel that my decision is comparable to such a course of action?"

"Indeed. With such tight security, won't the enemy slip off the hook?"

"I feel that it would be better to cast a net once we know there are fish in the pond."

"With normal enemies, that would work. However, we face a foe with sharp teeth that can chew through a net. Thus, your men are now in extreme danger."

"Then what should we do?"

"Call your men off for now. Do not put anyone around this cage. Wait for the fish to near the bait, and when the enemy swallows it, raise the rod in one go. If you understand, go change your troop assignments. Do so now!"

The gathered men were issued orders to disperse.

"Alright, get lost!"

After being given these dismissive orders, the fired-up men soon lost their drive and began grumbling. Some returned to their barracks while others returned to their original posts.

"Sorry, it was too noisy so I couldn't make the rest out."

"Ahhh, it's fine. You were a great help."

With that, Izumo put Delilah's bush hat back on her head, at the same time head patting her as a reward. He was not very gentle, which made her pout, but she still smiled shyly and looked away.

"Then, what should we do next?"

Izumo looked around for opinions. Kenzaki replied:

"All we can do is stick to the plan and perform a split assault, right? Team Two will launch a feint while Team One rescues the target. If we execute it well, we'll be able to retreat successfully."

Oshino, Utsuta and Imawano concurred.

Now that time was limited, they had no other choice. However, Izumo did not think that plan would work. The reason was because he had seen how the enemy commander looked. The man looked very impressive and fighting him would result in a lot of casualties. Izumo's instincts told him that more than half of the fourteen people here would not make it back alive.

Of course, that was not a problem. Each of them here was prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice. However, Izumo felt that any operation which assumed the loss of any of his men was a form of negligence on his part. Success achieved by luck, the will of the men and sacrifice could hardly be considered a success.

Izumo suddenly recalled a subordinate from a past training exercise, similar to this one. Unlike all his colleagues who had failed and died, he was the only one who had managed to save the hostage.

If he used the strategy that man had employed, it might work. However...

“Still, even so...”

He was highly averse to copying the actions of that man. After all, what that man had done transcended the boundaries of mere cunning and veered squarely into the realm of the despicable. No right-minded person would ever be able to do such a thing.

However, if he had to go up against a commander like that, such a morally repellent tactic might be the only way to overcome this situation. If it succeeded, they might be able to retreat without loses. If it failed, they could always fall back to the assault plan.

He felt it was worth giving it a go.

“There's something I want to try.”

Izumo laid the plan out to the others. As he had expected, they all seemed reluctant to consider it.



“I hate fishing!”

After receiving Godasen's orders, Borhos had dispersed his men from the plaza. However, with the night ending and the sky starting to light up, he found it difficult to continue waiting. Unable to contain his impatience, he paced back and forth, looking toward the bait in the cage, then turning in place like a bear. This cycle repeated itself over and over again.

Given his tension, the expected response was, "You're not suited for fishing, you should give it up." Even a newcomer knew that no matter how many lures one put down, one would not catch anything if one paced around them.

"If you asked me what I hate most, I'd reply that it would be bait fishing! I can't understand how he can calmly say things like that! Doesn't he feel sorry for the fish? They're surely thinking 'Mmm, that looks yummy, looks interesting' when they go for the bait, but turns out there's nothing there! It's a con! A sham! It's too much! And then instead they find a hook waiting for them! Does he have any idea of the depths of despair they're being plunged into?!"

Borhos cursed like he had been a fish in a past life. He passionately declaimed the feelings of the miserable fish on the hook to his men.

"The enemy should have infiltrated this place after dark. Is that right?"

Upon hearing that, Trooper Terry nodded while the rest of him remained ramrod straight.

"Yes, sir."

"And we're waiting for the enemy to take the bait, am I correct?"

"Yes, that's right, Centurion."

"Then why hasn't the enemy shown up? When the sun comes up, they won't be able to escape under cover of darkness. Is the enemy really that stupid? Could it be that they're a bunch of cowards who came all this way here to gaze admiringly upon the bait in the cage? To think even the Commander would make an error in judgement!"

The soldiers who had to bear the Primus Pilus' wrath looked unhappy, but all they could do was suffer in silence.

“That would be a mistake, Centurion.”

There was an unexpected response to Borhos’ furious ranting. It was Godasen’s voice.

“The enemy is far more cunning than we expected.”

“Commander-kakka?!”

When they turned to look, they saw that Godasen was surrounded by a group of men in speckled green uniforms, in front of the others.

His hands were tied and a sword blade pressed deeply into his throat.

Godasen shifted forward uneasily, as though being forced by the person behind him.

At a closer look, the reason why he could only shuffle forward was because his ankles had been tied together, probably to keep him from fleeing.

Borhos and the soldiers advanced, pointing at them and shouting:

“You filthy, despicable bastards! Have you no shame?!”

“Well, we haven’t bathed or changed since last night, so filthy would be appropriate. Sorry about that.”

With that, Izumo indicated that they should make a path.

“If you want your commander to keep his life, then please release my countryman in the cage to us.”

The Imperial troops shrank back as they heard the threat, but Borhos stood resolute and shook his head.

“Fat hope!”

“Then your commander’s chances will be slim indeed.”

“Borhos! Save me!” Godasen shouted.

However, the centurion replied, "Your Excellency, a moment please."

Then, he continued his threat: "If you dare kill the Commander, I'll have you hacked to pieces!"

As if to prove the truth of his words, the soldiers around them simultaneously nocked and drew their bows.

Looking around, there were more archers or crossbowmen than infantrymen with sword and shield. A closer look revealed many catapults and ballistas waiting in the wings.

It would seem the Imperial Army had gained much experience in the running battles with Japan. Primitive weapons could still be a threat in great numbers. In all likelihood, the Japanese would not be able to achieve overwhelming victory like before if they attempted an assault.

Izumo strove to mimic the thoughts and tone of his ex-subordinate and told the enemy:

"Well, being hacked to pieces just won't do, so we'll guarantee that we won't take his life."

Still, he felt that it was not a good imitation. It was too hard to copy Itami, after all.

"Good man. Looks like you have some sense. Then, let his Excellency go and surrender. If you do that, we won't kill you. You'll be treated better too."

Izumo desperately wanted to give the Imperial commander an honest answer, but if he did that, negotiations would immediately break down. He had to give the impression that there was still room to negotiate, while blustering off the other side's demands as though he did not care about the danger he was in.

What should he do now? How should he think, how would he answer? That man would surely mess up the tense atmosphere with his playful attitude.

Izumo struggled to recall Itami's words and deeds.

“Well, that would be a pain, No, no, if that happened, we wouldn’t be able to finish our mission.”

“Forget your mission, then. We’ve stationed an entire legion at Tanska to capture you. Currently, they’re converging on this location.

That much was true. The troops were pouring in from all directions. Izumo and the others were trapped like rats in a cage. The situation was getting worse and worse.

“Alright, so what will you do?”

“How about this? We’ll give a bit of the Commander-kakka back to you.”

In the past...

The scenario in that exercise was to recover a hostage being held by 50 SFG troopers.

Izumo and the others racked their brains and attempted a rescue, but since it was an exercise, the opposition knew when the attack would come. Thus, it was very difficult to surprise them.

The electronic tones indicating the deaths of his team members rang out continuously from their simulator gear, informing Izumo of the unshakeable reality of their defeat. The training instructors chalked this up to the operational conditions, saying, “How could anyone launch an actual surprise attack during a training exercise?”

However, Itami had pointed his gun at the SFG commander who had come to inspect the training exercise and taken him hostage, then requested an exchange of hostages.

“Release the hostage, or I won’t be able to guarantee this man’s safety.”

Of course, they could not accept such a request. The OPFOR team commander ignored Itami’s request. It was training, after all. Even if Itami said he would harm the hostage, the fact was that he could not carry it out. Thus, they disregarded him.

And then, before the eyes of the SFG members, Itami proceeded to cruelly pluck the remaining strands of the SFG commander’s hair one after the other. Everyone knew how much the Commander cared about his ever-dwindling hair, how he bought expensive

hair-growth tonics and tended it carefully. They knew that a gentleman would not go anywhere near it.

Yet, Itami was the opposite. JGSDF safety standards were extremely high and the actions that could be taken in training were very limited. Since the SFG had been chosen from the larger body of regular servicemen, there was no way they could not have known that. They were already pigeonholed into the mindset of "This is training". Thus, what Itami had come up with was to launch a surprise attack on that mindset.

As they witnessed his cruel actions, the SFG members grit their teeth in resentment and anger, on the verge of crying out in despair. "Here, I'll give you back a bit of him." When presented with a few strands of hair, the OPFOR commander's face was a picture of utmost misery. Thus, crushed by the thought of "did he have to go that far" and driven by the desire to protect the thinning strands of their commander's hair, the OPFOR had no choice but to accede to Itami's request.

Of course, the umpires ruled that his attempt was "successful". Because of that, the commanders and even the men underwent a change in mindset. The most important thing now was, "We are the SFG. Nothing is true, everything is permitted."

Itami, the man responsible for this, received both a commendation and "special considerations" from the SFG commander... in other words, he was forcibly enrolled in a series of comprehensive long-term training courses from which he could not possibly escape.

Izumo and the others had not copied his methods exactly. This was because plucking a few strands of their hostage's hair would not make much of a difference. Still, that was one way of doing it.

It was for that reason that Itami's actions had been deemed "effective", even though they had raised much debate around them.

"A bit? What did you say, a bit?!" Borhos was confused by what those words meant.

"Now, which finger would be best?"

Delilah's tone was sunny and cheerful as she directed that question to Godasen. Shocked, Godasen practically shrieked at the Warrior Bunny holding a sword on him: "What, what are you doing? What are you going to do to me?"

Delilah's eyes narrowed, and she asked:

"I was asking which finger you could do without. Hurry up. If you don't decide soon, I'll start by chopping off your right thumb."

"Stop, please stop! Please!"

"Well, if you return the Japanese man to us, you won't need to suffer."

"Paul, Borhos, save me!"

A bitter expression came over the Primus Pilus' face as he replied:

"Your Excellency, please bear with this. We can't fall for their scheme!"

"Look, he's telling you to bear with it. Well then, pick a finger."

"But, but why? Please, save me, I'm begging you! I'll give you the bait, just stop!"

"Well, let's start with your right thumb, then~"

With that, Delilah pressed the edge of her sword to Godasen's right thumb.

"I, I'm right-handed. At the very least, start with my left ring finger!"

The fact that he did not pick the little finger was proof that he was a quick thinker. When humans held bat-like objects, they used the little finger to stabilize their grip. Losing the little finger was third only to losing the thumb or index finger, and it would make life very difficult.

"Guaaaaaaaaargh!"

So great was Godasen's pain that the tears flowed freely. He screamed like he was going to wear his throat out.

Delilah looked to Borhos. "See? We'll return a bit to you," and tossed a slim white object out at him.

The object rolled to a halt before Borhos. As he took it in, he bellowed, “What have you done, you bastards?!”

“Hey, you wanted him back, so we gave him back. Now, give us back our countryman.”

“You savages! You barbarians!” the Imperial troops cried in unison. Izumo and the others were bathed in a storm of invective. However, Izumo nonchalantly continued:

“Looks like one wasn’t enough. How about a couple more?”

“Next will be your right ring finger, and then your left middle finger, then your right middle finger, and then your right ear. Well, the ladies won’t be falling for you anytime soon, but it’s better than being inconvenienced in other ways, right...?”

Izumo and Delilah laid out the dangerous situation Godasen was in. The combined terror and pain was too much for Godasen, and he passed out.

“Oh dear. I was hoping he would be able to walk under his own power.”

“Well, if we’re going to drag him, why not chop his legs off to save weight?”

Hearing this, Borhos was at his wits’ end. Still, all he could do was protect Godasen’s life.

“So we’ll return this Japanese man’s finger to you as—”

Just as Trooper Terry moved to carry out Borhos’ orders, the hand holding his sword was blown away and he collapsed to the ground.

The surrounding soldiers were spattered in his blood. They backed away with terrified looks on their faces, because they realized that the Japanese had not done anything. Looking around, they did not see any trace of the enemy either. All they knew was that they had been attacked from a great distance.

That was Matoi’s sniping. He had moved to a vantage point where he could overlook the entire area and had been studying the situation as it developed.

The Imperial soldiers made a path for Kenzaki, unwilling to fall under the barrel of his M4 carbine.

“It can’t be helped. We can’t let the Commander-kakka be hurt any further.”

Unable to think calmly and clearly and forced to a decision, Borhos ordered his men to “let them pass” as a sweat cascaded down his back.

The SFG troopers clustered up as they approached the cage in the center of the plaza.

The Imperial troops backed away from Izumo and the others, their bows still nocked and drawn.

Once they reached the cage, Kenzaki and Oshino broke the lock and addressed the man inside using Japanese.

“Are you Matsui Fuyuki-kun?”

“...Yes, I am,” came the Japanese reply.

There was no doubt that this was their objective. Now, all they had to do was retreat. Just then, a new voice hailed Izumo and the others.

“Alright, men of Nihon. Put down your weapons and surrender!”

That voice belonged to Oprichnik Dulles.

Dulles was wearing his elegantly-made kobold mask and cut an impressive figure. He strode before Borhos as though he were the true officer commanding here.

“The Commander-kakka is a man who values his public image. If he knew you let them go like this, he would surely blame himself. The responsibility for the failed operation will surely fall upon his shoulders.”

“So? What about it?”

“Do you not understand, Primus Pilus? We need to consider the Commander’s feelings. In order to prevent his family and vassals from being dispossessed and forced onto the streets, tell your men to disregard everything and capture them!”

However, the soldiers glanced at Borhos, as though looking for confirmation on whether or not to make a move.

Dulles grew impatient with the insubordinate soldiers and shouted, "Seize these men! Did you not hear me?!"

However, the situation was far too prickly. As though mirroring the men's thoughts, Borhos replied: "Oprichnik Dulles. The Commander-kakka distinctly begged us to 'save me'."

"You are mistaken!"

"No, I am not."

"You seem to have misunderstood the Commander's intentions. I am certain Godasen-kakka would surely say 'It's alright, don't worry about me, just get them!'"

"No, no, I clearly heard 'save me'."

The soldiers nodded one after the other to indicate that they had heard the same thing.

"Then, I order you once more — arrest these men!"

"We can't do that."

"Do you wish to be purged?"

"Oprichnik-dono. I am the Commander's subordinate."

"But the Commander has become a hostage and has lost the ability to make rational judgements. That said, I am now the highest-ranking commander present."

"I agree that the Commander can no longer think rationally. However, the chain of command passes through him, and not through you, Oprichnik-dono. When the commander is absent, authority falls to the second-in-command. When the second-in-command has not yet arrived at the scene, then the Primus Pilus becomes the commanding officer."

The soldiers were hard-pressed to veil their discomfort at the power struggle playing out before them.

Under normal circumstances, Borhos would be right. But anyone who angered an Oprichnik might find themselves being purged. Rather than get involved in the details, it was better to give in to the other party. One could consider that a humanitarian reason. However, the Primus Pilus was a stubborn man, and he could not adapt that well. He was not in the habit of bowing and scraping to those in authority. His men considered it both a strength and weakness of his, which was also why they approved highly of him.

While all this was taking place, Izumo took advantage of the dispute to order Kenzaki and Oshino to grab the kidnappee. They were preparing to flee.

Borhos saw this and shouted, "Wait! Stop right there, you lot!" But he was distracted by Dulles shouting "That's enough, listen to me!"

Kenzaki and Oshino took this opportunity to escape the cage.

"Who gave you permission to flee?!"

"What? I figured that since you had forgotten about us, we could go back."

"I'll deal with you after I settle this. Wait there until I'm done. Do you hear me?!"

Perhaps it was a habit of his, but Borhos ended up pointing his index finger at Izumo and the others while he was speaking. Of course, none of that constituted a reason for Izumo to stay, so they flatly denied him.

"Ahhh, well, to be honest, I don't really have time for this, so I'll make a move first. As you can see, the kidnappee's kind of frail. Then there's the bleeding from the Commander-kakka's finger. We can't stop it. He might die if we don't treat him."

"What's this? How could you disregard him like that! Stanch his bleeding!"

"Well, we tried performing some first aid, but it's not enough. That's what's happening now, no?"

Delilah replied in a tone that was calculated to grate on his nerves. Frustrated and angry, Borhos could only click his tongue loudly.

“I understand, it can’t be helped. If you guarantee you won’t harm the Commander-kakka any further, I’ll let you pass to the main gates. Once there, you will release the Commander-kakka at once!”

“Oi! Borhos! Do you know what you’re doing?”

“Please be quiet, Oprichnik-dono. This concerns the Commander-kakka’s life.”

“You’re letting us proceed to the gates?”

Izumo looked like he was willing to agree to Borhos’ terms.

“Correct. We can concede that much. You will release the Commander-kakka once you reach there. How about that?”

Dulles shook his head, unable to believe what he was hearing. Even if the regional commander had been taken hostage, he could not help but think of them as weak for actually negotiating with the enemy.

“It can’t be helped. If we don’t do something...”

He glanced to one of his men behind him.

Surprise flickered over the faces of Dulles’s men, but then they said, “It’s our turn,” and drew back their bows. The bowstring creaked as it was pulled taut, and they took aim in the direction of Izumo and his group.

“Alright, it’s a deal, then. We’ll clear a path for you to the main gates. Oi, you lot, stand down. And then get the physician. We must treat the Commander-kakka immediately once we recover him.”

After Borhos gestured, the soldiers moved in unison, like mechanical dolls. In an instant, they had formed a corridor of men leading to the main gates.

Izumo could not help but be impressed by their drilling and coordination.

“They may be enemies, but they’re pretty damn good.”

As he had expected, this man was a dangerous foe. Anyone who could direct his troops so well with a single order must have extraordinary command ability.

However, as Izumo muttered to himself, a pair of arrows streaked toward Godasen. Delilah immediately batted aside one of them with her sword, but the other sank into the hostage’s chest.

The pain from the hit woke Godasen, and his cries of agony rang through the plaza.

“Dammit! Go go go!”

Izumo and the others wasted no time in counterattacking. They threw grenades into the Imperial army’s formations and blew apart the walls of men. Smoke grenades went everywhere, instantly veiling the surroundings in a heavy curtain of white smoke. The sounds of gunfire and explosions flooded the plaza.

“Fall back! Fall back! Who, who loosed those arrows?!”

Borhos bellowed loudly as his men died one after the other, in order to keep them from falling into chaos. The troops fled in all directions, as though afraid of being enveloped by the smoke.

Elsewhere, the SFG troopers hiding in the smoke did not have it easy either. Arrows flew from all directions and peppered Izumo and the others.

Within moments, several men were on the ground.

“This is bad. But that means it’s my turn!”

The first person to react effectively was Delilah.

She used Godasen as a human shield, and did not flee, but charged into the ranks of the Imperial infantry.

As the Warrior Bunny blitzed the Imperial battle-line, they could not bring themselves to shoot at Godasen. That was all Delilah needed to reach them. Unable to switch to

their swords in time, they were cut down one after the other by Delilah's flashing blade.

"That stupid bunny! She charged in recklessly again!"

However, Izumo shouted, "Follow Delilah!"

The unwounded members assumed their formation, Utsuta leading the way. He covered Kenzaki and the others, who were moving the wounded SFG troopers and the kidnappee, and then they launched their own assault.

Izumo might have called Delilah stupid, but she seemed to be having an easier time surrounded by enemies. All she had to do was swing at everything that moved. In contrast, the Imperial footsoldiers were having a hard time. Delilah was surrounded by their own people, after all. They hesitated in shooting, afraid to wound their comrades. Even if they hit her, they could not hurt her severely. In the end, the Imperial losses mounted.

And then, the SFG troopers were fighting as well. Their forward push threw the Imperials into chaos and trapped them between a rock and a hard place.

"At them! You will *not* retreat!"

Dulles bellowed at the soldiers and waved his sword from a safe position.

When thrown into confusion, the right decision would be to temporarily fall back to regroup and restore order. However, Dulles was very angry at his orders being overruled. He desperately tried to countermand Borhos' orders to pull back, which only added to the chaos.

As Izumo watched this from afar, he picked up his radio handset.

"Archer, this is Caster. Are you enjoying the show from there? If you can, put a few rounds downrange for me."

His reply was a crisp "Roger", and then it happened.

Dulles's head — covered by a kobold mask — was suddenly gone.

There were no holes in it, nor had it split. It was simply that everything above Dulles's neck had vanished, pulverized into scraps and fragments of flying meat and bone.

It had happened just as the angered Dulles was about to stab at Borhos. The sheer impact of the event stole everyone's eyes, and they froze in place.

A direct hit from an anti-materiel sniper rifle's 12.7mm rounds tended to do that to human heads.

The decapitated man collapsed to the ground. Dyed red from the spray of Dulles's gore, Borhos' mind briefly shut down. Only after wiping off the face full of blood and looking down at his carmine hands did he realize what had just happened.

He looked around. Then, he discovered Godasen's body lying beside an Imperial soldier, near an expended smoke grenade. He ran closer and realized that although he had passed out, the arrow had only struck his shoulder, so there was not much damage. The stump of Godasen's finger was bleeding, but his life was not in any immediate danger.

“Cheh. I fell for it, huh?”

“Centurion! The enemy's fleeing! Should we pursue?”

After the men around him asked him that question, Borhos finally came to his senses and gave his orders.

“No need for that. We anticipated that something like this would happen, so we had troops placed in ambush nearby. They never had a chance to escape in the first place. Our priority now is to aid the Commander-kakka.”

Borhos called out the nearby soldiers and ordered them to move Godasen. Then he ordered: “Sound the bugles! Have the ambush troops move in! We will trap the enemies like rats in a cage!”



“Enemies at Point C too!”

“We'll change evac point to D!”

“Hurry!”

The tension on the scene filtered through the wireless connection.

There were some in the Chinook who grew afraid as they heard this. There were some who grew impatient and uneasy. And then, there were those who were silent in order to control the pounding of their hearts.

“O-onee-sama. Are you alright?”

A shuddering, panting Rory nodded to Giselle. If she were on the ground, she would probably have charged out. However, she had to stay here. If she stayed here, she could reach the ground sooner.

The Chinook began to descend. If one looked carefully, they could see the battle taking place in the distance.

“This is Hayabusa, descending on Point D. Status report!”

“Hayabusa, you say? Good name. We should be able to make it back no matter what happens. This is Caster, moving to point D. Enemies are popping out from everywhere, we’re having a hard time.”

Itami poked his head out from under the pilot’s armpit and shouted into the pilot’s mike.

“Avenger here. Caster, any wounded?”

“Yo, long time no see, Avenger. Glad to hear you’re still the same. We’ve got more hurt than unhurt. What do you have in mind?”

“We expected that, so we brought a pretty nurse along. She loves casualties and she was going on about ‘I don’t care if they’re dying or their heads are falling off, all victims belong to me’. If we don’t give her casualties, we’ll become the next casualties.”

“That nurse of yours sounds like a real maneater . How come all the women you meet are like that? Kuribayashi’s cute, but scary too.”

Apparently, any date with Kuribayashi would involve passing by a dojo or boxing ring, and she believed in passionate engagements with her partners. Apparently, winning such an engagement would result in a delightful prize... but sadly, nobody had won that prize so far.

(TL Note: the JP uses 突き合い, which sounds like 付き合い. The first refers to sparring, the second refers to dating)

“Wouldn’t you want to be eaten up by a beautiful woman? Just make sure you all come back.”

“Ahh, leave that to me.”

Itami turned back to brief his men and the local collaborators.

“Our mission is to secure the landing sight. Once the SFG troopers get aboard, we’ll dust off immediately, so don’t stray too far from the Chinook. Kurokawa, there’ll be casualties galore as you just heard, so I’ll leave their treatment to you.”

“Do I look like some sort of man-eating ogress to you?”

Kurokawa cracked her knuckles as she glared at Itami.

“I, I said a beautiful nurse, didn’t I? That’s okay, right? Right?”

“Right you are. Prepare yourself.”

As she spoke in a menacing, ogrish tone, Kurokawa picked up the defibrillator paddles for her portable Artificial Electrical Defibrillator (AED) unit and pointed them at Itami. Sparks flew between them, as though promising electroshock therapy for him.

“If possible, I hope the professors and Pina-denka can help with the wounded too. And Rory...”

“What is it?”

“Our mission isn’t to kill them all, but to clear an escape route.

As Itami told her not to miss the chance to pull back, Rory shrugged and replied, “I got it.”



“Ambush troops in Point D!”

“We can’t change the plan now. Force our way through!”

“That’s too reckless!”

“That’s what it means to be SF!”

The rear hatch opened, and the chopper’s downwash swept into the cabin like a typhoon.

As the helicopter hovered near the surface, the monsters, demihumans and Imperial footsoldiers gathered around it. Some of them were poorly equipped. It would seem they had pressed mercenaries and gangsters into service as auxiliaries. Even so, there were enough of them to make extraction tricky.

“Open fire! Keep firing!” Kuwabara ordered. In response, Kurata and the others fired madly.

And in front of them, black blossoms bloomed.

Rory leapt from an alarming altitude, her skirts fluttering in the wind. The instant she touched the ground, her halberd reaped a wide circle of enemies.

“Cover her! Fire! Fire!”

Kurata and the others opened fire on Rory’s flanks as she carved a crimson road through the foe.

During this time, Itami was looking for the rescue team.

He saw four men bearing a stretcher.

Covering them were about ten men with M4 carbines pointed in all directions, gunning down the Imperial troops in hot pursuit.

There were those among them who were leaning on their comrades' shoulders, probably from wounds, but everyone looked exhausted. They seemed to be trying their hardest to run, but all they could manage was a brisk walk closer.

That being the case, why not go out and get them? Having decided that, Itami turned to Tuka and the others as the helicopter landed and shouted, "Alright, let's go!" and charged out.

With covering fire from Kurata and the others, combined with Yao and Tuka's arrow fire, Lelei shouted, "Go!" and explosions cut down the arrows flying through the air towards them.

"Professors! What are you doing? Don't follow me!"

The troubling thing was the fact he was being trailed by unarmed civilians.

"What are you saying? Don't take us for doddering dotards!"

Youmei, Urushibata and Shirai took over the stretcher from Kenzaki and the others. "Good, let's go!" they said, as though carrying luggage. Thanks to them, Oshino and Kenzaki were freed up to join the fighting.

The cameraman lugged his camera to film the sight of the SFG troopers being pursued by the enemy, while Nanami yelled into her mike, "And now the JSDF's special forces troopers have returned. There look to be a lot of wounded — aaaaahhhh!"



An arrow flying from behind her struck the Chinook's rear rotor and was reduced to dust, which landed on Nanami.

Katsumoto pulled Nanami back and hid her behind him.

Lelei's funnels flew forth again, exploding in mid-air.

"Gramps! Headcount!"

After seeing the SFG troopers scramble aboard the Chinook, Itami shouted, "Alright, we're dusting off! Everyone, come back!"

On Itami's command, everyone rushed back in. Even Rory — whom he was afraid would not return mid-slaughter — ran back, clutching her halberd.

"All aboard!"

As Kuwabara shouted that, the Chinook left the surface once more.

Looking back into the depths of the helicopter's cargo compartment, he could see Kurokawa inserting cannulas into the arms of the wounded men, one after the other. "Alright, next! Alright, next!" she shouted, as she went from casualty to casualty.

"What, what's she doing?"

Pina had been pressed into service as a tourniquet tyer, so as to make the wounded troopers' veins more visible. She had no idea what Kurokawa was doing. After all, treatment to her meant stopping blood loss or dressing wounds. However, Kurokawa was simply poking her casualties with a needle.

"Circulation secure! Hamilton-sama, please help stop their bleeding!"

When performing first aid during an emergency situation like an accident or a natural disaster, the most important thing was to ensure the integrity of the circulation system. Once too much blood was lost, the casualty's blood vessels would collapse and there would be no way to insert a cannula. Thus, saline solution was used to maintain blood pressure and prevent hypovolemic shock. In addition, one could infuse drugs intravenously through the cannula, which made treatment easy.

Of course, there was only so much one could infuse through the radial veins, so if the need arose, they might need to infuse through one of the bigger veins in the chest instead. However, there did not seem to be anyone who required such treatment among Kurokawa's casualties.

"Yo, Itami, I don't recall seeing you work this hard even when you were under me..."

A tall man patted Itami on the shoulder.

"It's been awhile, Major Izumo. This time, we've got civilians in attendance and a film crew present, so I wanted to show them how cool we can be."

Behind Izumo, the other men of the SFG — covered in mud and grass — presented themselves to him. Among them were Kenzaki, Matoi, Utsuta, Oshino and Imawano. Then there was someone with sleek curves, for whom the term "man" was not appropriate. She bounded up ahead of the others.

A pair of arms wrapped around Itami, and he was briefly baffled.

"Boss Itami! It's been a while!"

"Hey, isn't that Delilah? What are you doing here?"

Indeed, it was Delilah. Delilah — who had once worked in Arnus' cantina — was now dressed in camouflage fatigues and her bunny ears were hidden under a bush hat. Nobody would have equated the two unless it was pointed out.

Izumo spoke on her behalf.

"Working with the locals has produced excellent results. You've done it yourself, haven't you? So, Yanagida told me to make use of this bunnygirl."

Delilah had been put on trial in a Tokyo courthouse for what she had done in Arnus, and she was sentenced to probation.

She did not complain about her sentence given what she had done to deserve it, and meekly accepted the court's verdict. That said, she could not return to House Formal or the ALC's cantina. With nowhere to go, Delilah decided to atone for her sins by

taking care of Yanagida. Once he returned to the frontlines, she had become a local collaborator.

“I got rid of the person who tricked me!”

“That’s good. But are you alright? Physically, I mean.”

“Aw, everywhere from my waist to my ass is damaged goods now. I can’t say ‘Don’t touch it, it’s not cheap stuff’ any more. Want to see? You can touch too, if you want.”

With that, Delilah suddenly began pulling off her belt, so Itami hurriedly stopped her with a “wait wait wait”.

“You’re doing okay, right?”

“No, that’s because the doctors were amazing. He fitted me with something called ‘titanium’ to replace my hipbone. It took me a month to learn how to walk again.”

Itami was quite surprised by the fact that she was bouncing around barely a month after such major surgery, but Delilah simply went on gushing about the efficacy of Japanese doctors.

“Well, it does ache a little. Still, it’s great. I’m better off than Master Yanagida.”

Delilah replied that she would accompany Yanagida all her life to atone for her mistakes.

While they had this conversation, the cameraman turned his lens on the freshly rescued kidnappee. Nanami extended her microphone to the person on the stretcher.

“Can you tell us your name?”

It would seem his captors had not fed him properly, but his face was skinny and his lips were split. Even so, he panted and replied:

“Matsui... Fuyuki.”

“How do you feel about being rescued?”

“Am, am I rescued? Can I go back? Can I go home, back to Japan? This isn’t a dream... this isn’t a dream, is it?”

This was not the answer Nanami had expected, but she decided to let him continue speaking, because those words came from his heart. After that, Nanami squeezed his hand and said, “Yes, you can go home. You can go back to Japan.”



“But why?!”

Nanami directed her impassioned plea at the news director.

This was because she had not been allowed to report on the material she had collected in the Special Region: on the Apocryph, the earthquakes, the stellar distortions, as well as the recovery of the kidnap victim.

Of course, she had asked why they were not releasing this exclusive scoop. No, one could say that it was her duty to ask why. After all, she had not gathered her material by herself; her cameraman, the SFG members of the JSDF, Professor Youmei and the other academics had all come together to help her put it together. Not publishing it could be said to be disregarding their hard work and the (in some cases literal) sweat and blood they had put into it. It was nothing short of corruption.

She was not sure if the news director understood this, but he did not look Nanami in the eye. Perhaps he was feeling guilty. Instead he gazed at the ceiling and muttered to himself before forcing out an excuse.

“Instructions from the top. They said that they didn’t want to startle the affected person. There were problems with Noriko-san because people rushed to present her first, so they’re waiting for him to recover first.”

“And that means covering up something that affects every single person in this country?”

“We’re not covering it up. We’re simply prioritizing other big news. Timeslots are limited, and I decide how to fill them. That’s what they call freedom of the press, right?”

“Yet you have the time to broadcast B-list gourmet and pet owner specials?”

“These are important news items too. The audience will be stressed out if we do nothing but report exciting news.”

“Then what about the abnormalities in the Special Region? It’s a big matter that concerns the existence of the Gate and it won’t harm our political neutrality.”

“The Special Region... the Special Region, huh... well, you might say that, but the Special Region is not just a matter of global interest, but the focus of an impending expansion, no? The nations are coming together and looking to the Special Region with interest. Share prices are going up as well... I don’t think we ought to put a damper on this good mood with news like that.”

“You dense motherfucker!”

Nanami kicked the wastepaper basket beside her.

Of course, it would have been stupid to actually do that. Instead, Nanami had meekly replied, “Okie, I get it,” and left the director’s office, before taking her anger out on an innocent wastepaper basket in the hallway. She had been wondering why someone would put a wastepaper basket in the hallway for some time now; *perhaps it was there for people to vent their anger*, she mused.

“None of that shit even matters!”

However exclusive a scoop might be, it was worthless if it did not get published. Nanami pouted as she returned to her desk, dropping herself onto her chair like she was going to pulverize it with her butt.

“Son of a bitch. If you’re going to be like that, then I’ll—”

Nanami looked at the cameraman seated opposite her, and extended her hand.

“Sunagawa-kun, please give me the memory stick with the Special Region video we put together.”

“Don’t see why not,” the cameraman said as he produced it from his desk and gave it to Nanami.

“What do you want it for, anyway?” he asked.

“Do you have to ask?! Won’t it be a shame if things ended like this? I’m going to upload it to a video-sharing site.”

“Oi, that would be bad!”

The cameraman reached out to get the stick back.

However, Nanami had already stuffed it into the cleavage of her ample bosom, twice the size of others. “How so? He’s not reporting it. What difference does it make?”

The cameraman could not bring himself to reach out for the stick. If he touched her by accident, he would be branded as a pervert. He would be excommunicated from society. Therefore, he tried to talk Nanami over while saying, “Calm down, calm down.”

“There should be a reason why the higher-ups aren’t releasing this, right? If you share this online, you might end up getting fired.”

“Fire away, then, not like it’s a big deal. I’d rather quit a shitty station like this!”

“What’ll you do after you quit?! It took you so long to become a presenter! Think about the consequences!”

“I’ve thought about it already. Sunset industries like TV stations are on their way out!”

“Oi oi oi. You two are getting really heated up over there. I heard all the dangerous things you said, you know.”

The man addressing the feuding pair with acid tones was Komurasaki.

“Ko-Ko-Komurasaki-san?!”

“What’s someone from another TV station doing here?” Nanami blurted.

“Don’t be so cold. Didn’t we go to the Special Region together? I heard you came back, so I came to visit you. Looking at you, it seems you did a pretty good job.”

“It’s all wasted, though. They won’t broadcast it.”

“Well, I expected as much. It only makes sense.”

“What! Why?!”

“Isn’t it obvious? Their business plan is to increase their TV viewership and paper circulation numbers by fanning the flames of anti-government sentiment. Thus, any news regarding the Special Region will be calculated to tie into international or economic issues.”

“Do, do they think they can get away with suppressing the media for material gain?”

“It’s not a matter of getting away with it. If it doesn’t sell, they won’t do it. In Japan, there might be some slight differences in the content of TV programs and newspapers, but ultimately, they cover the same things and have the same inclinations, no? The reason for that is because something is guiding them in the same direction.”

“So you mean there’s a human factor involved?”

“Indeed.”

“Who on earth could do such a thing?”

“Who? If you have to ask that question, then you fail as a newsmaker. Take for example, who are the clients of the TV station?”

“The audience.”

“Wrong. The TV stations have never treated their audience as customers or whatnot. Their true patrons are the sponsors who pay them. However, the sponsors are generally content to pay up and not care about the details of the programming. Now, who handles those details?”

“The advertising agencies.”

“Precisely. The advertising agencies say, ‘We’re planning so-and-so program; want to invest in it?’ and thus they draw investors. Therefore, the sponsors are mainly

concerned about whether the program is beneficial to their advertisements and not the actual content.”

“But, could it be, how could it be, the ad agencies...”

“Papers and the like would not have survived until today without advertisements. It’s easy to imagine how the papers can’t publish anything which would make the advertising companies look bad, but the same goes double for TV programming. The advertising agencies have a lot of say in what sort of shows get made.”

“So all this is the result of deliberate action by the ad agencies?”

“I told you just now, didn’t I? If you have to ask ‘who did it’, you fail as a newsmaker... Alright, I’ll discuss this with you. Come with me.”

“I’ll pass on that. I need to upload this...”

“Like I was saying, you can do it after listening to me!”



“How about here?” Komurasaki said as he picked another location.

“We’re still at work,” Nanami answered. However, a glance outside the windows revealed that it was night time. Time flew by when one was working hard.

Komirasaki and Nanami stood up, heading for a nearby pub.

“Welcome!”

“Let’s start with beer and peanuts. We’ll order more later on...”

After that exchange with the shop attendant, they took facing seats in a booth, and then Nanami asked:

“Komurasaki-san, are you alright? Fuku-san, Matsu-san... I’m sorry for your loss.”

As fellow representatives of the media to the Special Region, they were all comrades. Nanami expressed her condolences over the deaths of Komurasaki’s colleagues.

“Thank you. Why don’t you offer up some joss sticks to them next time round? They were worried about you, Kuribayashi. I’m sure they’d appreciate it.”

Komurasaki downed the beer that the waitress brought him in one gulp.

“Now then,” he began, with a serious air that would better fit a university lecturer.

“Let’s start from the beginning. This entity called the mass media is like the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages. At that time, the church proclaimed itself to be the intermediary between God and Man, with exclusive power over the interpretation of the Bible, as well as possessing the power to excommunicate those who defied their power and even have them put to death as heretics. Such was their power that they could even threaten kings and emperors, themselves the leaders of the secular world. Why could they do that? Because they controlled the hearts and minds of the people. Similarly, the Japanese media has free reign over the people and thus the approval ratings of the government. By making minute adjustments in their content and spreading it broadly, they can tank the approval ratings of the government. Though the media does not claim to be God, they still have the power to demonize those who defy them and even topple the mighty from their positions of power. Those who are denounced as heretics will be ruthlessly cross-examined and harangued by the media — like inquisitions of old — and if they cannot give the media satisfactory answers, they will be hounded to death by the same questions over and over again. If they keep quiet, their silence becomes tacit acknowledgement of their sins, and thus they are branded as heretics. With that in mind, having a microphone shoved in your face is equivalent to being confronted by all your sins and ugly moments, being played over and over again. It’s like being burned at the stake, and indeed, sometimes it’s nothing less than a witch hunt.”

“And as an inquisitor yourself, you’re one to talk?”

Kuribayashi turned a doubting gaze on Komurasaki.

“Well, calling me an inquisitor is flattery. Although it’s true; to some extent, I do count as an inquisitor.”

Komurasaki punctuated his statement with a large mouthful of beer. His mouth ringed in foam, he continued:

“Still, Kuribayashi. There was a reason why the religions back then went hysterical.”

“Why, what was the reason?”

“Because the Renaissance was not a sudden thing.”

The religious bodies of the time realized that the people were starting to become intelligent.

They realized that the mindless little sheep of old would no longer obey them, and thus they became nervous and uneasy, launching their inquisitions and witch hunts. They condemned those who doubted the faith and attacked them, then framed them as heretics and had them murdered.

“The reason is simple; because they fear the people. At that time, the worldview of the faithful and what the people observed in reality were already starting to diverge. Are you familiar with the trial of Galileo? No matter what the tribunal ruled, the world still moved. They knew that point well, but the Church could not accept this. In order to make the people believe what the Church said, they had to stir up the people and constantly create a sense of unity.

They attacked their scapegoats with criticism, creating a unique form of unity in the form of mass hysteria. It was similar to the religious mania felt by celebrants in festivals. Thus, they prowled around, looking for people to attack. They rewarded informants and practiced torture, and those who confessed because they could not endure the torture were deemed guilty. As for those who staunchly denied their wrongdoings, being able to withstand torture was proof enough that they were witches, and thus guilty. With that logic as a forethought, they carried out their sentences.”

“Ah, but in the end they shot themselves in the foot.”

Nanami recalled entertainment shows where artistes with questionable conduct were repeatedly hounded with all sorts of inane questions.

“And that led to the reformation of the churches?”

“Exactly. Even in this information age, new religions move in the shadows, threatening the original media. As the power of religion declined, people’s minds were freed and

the Renaissance flowered in full. Similarly, today anyone can spread their opinions widely through the Internet. Thus, people have no need to express their views through the filter of the media and obtain their news. The people are slowly drifting away from the media and the views they espouse.”

As Komurasaki described the revolution of the Internet as a prelude to throwing off a dark age, Nanami interrupted:

“As more sources of news appear, the value of each individual source degrades. It’s true that the Internet was useful in overthrowing Middle Eastern dictators, but those were basically revolutions targeted at removing people. They paid no heed to what happened after removing the people in power. The dream that all will be well after the bad people are gone caused all sorts of tragedy.”

Komurasaki nodded, as though to say, *so you do get it after all.*

“What? I always thought you were a fan of the Internet, Kuribayashi.”

“It’s because I support it that I understand its limits and dangers. People are drawn by the news they like and form an opinion, and from then on their confirmation bias leads them to view all new evidence as further support for their beliefs, while disregarding evidence to the contrary.”

“In other words, all the news in the world won’t reach someone with different values from yourself.”

“Do you know how many blogs there are out there which aren’t read by anyone? The same applies to Twitter; famous people have fans, but hardly anyone ever reads messages sent by average people. Those are on the level of friends exchanging diaries; they’re hardly newsworthy. They’re little more than babbling to themselves.”

“That’s right. We need something with impact or interest to draw peoples’ eyes to what they’re not familiar with. Martin Luther King once said, ‘I have a dream’, and those words had a great impact, but if some guy around you said the same thing, the people around him would reply, ‘Oh really?’ and essentially ignore it. Thus, the messages important people send are more powerful.”

“I feel that is the purpose of the media.”

"It's just like you say. In truth, the news the media reports gains authority and power. Anyone would write off 'I saw a god' as some teenage girl's delusions, but once the Vatican corroborates it, it becomes a miracle, and that girl becomes a saint. That should be it, right?"

"Komurasaki-san, wouldn't you be better off as a university lecturer? You certainly sound like one," Nanami replied.

"Well, the fact is that people have asked me if I wanted to become an assistant professor... no, let's not talk about that. My point is that someone in the media has to be fully conscious of their power. The Vatican will not casually endorse any old happening as a miracle. The decision to do so is born from thoroughly investigating the circumstances and the consequences of such an endorsement."

"In other words, it's a deliberate order, then?"

Nanami sighed. She did not approve of that sort of thing, because it implied that the person who gave such an order was doing so from a position of power.

"In this internet age, news flows like a mudslide, and vast quantities of information are sent out every moment. But simply sharing information is not in itself a good thing. Wasn't there a case where a lot of diplomatic problems resulted after someone set up a site which leaked state secrets? Because of that, a group of people had to start considering how to keep their information from leaking out. The idea is to carefully vet information before releasing it, but the Internet makes this troublesome. Censorship and regulation is not very effective either. If you ask me, the purpose of the media now is to criticize, evaluate, dismiss and provide legitimacy to information sources."

"Now, assuming there's vetting of content and a decision-making process on whether or not to release specific pieces of news... then who decides what stays or goes, and what criteria do they use? If it's the ad agencies pulling strings behind the scenes like you said, then all we television people have to do is obey them, right?"

"Which brings us to our point," Komurasaki said.

"Of course, as members of the press, we are motivated by all sorts of mindsets and values. We collect information based on these motivations, we process them, and finally we broadcast it. And the prime motivation for the ad agencies is financial."

“In other words, what sells and what turns a profit, right?”

“Correct. So they follow the mood... or rather, they follow the trends, eagerly chasing their asses. They write reports which follow the state of the world, and turn their mikes on events which excite the masses and make them heard. This is the reason why they get ratings and their news sell. Because of that, they have agreed to seal off news which runs counter to these trends which they have invested heavily in. Their objective is to avoid putting a damper on positive economic trends.”

“Cheh,” Nanami clicked her tongue. “Komurasaki-san, you don’t seem to see it their way.”

“The first thing I consider is “fear”. Events which lead to rapid development and change make people afraid. Thus, I regard criticism and analysis of everything I see to be a basic component of my working attitude. Criticism is natural. I use a critical eye to attempt to remain neutral.”

“Can’t you just stick to the facts?”

“Well, that would be ideal. But realistically speaking, it’s impossible. If you write an article that’s pro-government, even once, the government personnel will reach their hands out to you and say ‘pleased to make your acquaintance.’ Did you know that a sizable amount of the Cabinet’s secret budget goes to the press?”

“I know of examples to the opposite. There are news shows where critics are paid speakers’ fees for a single appearance which exceed what we make every month, by backers whose funding has the opposition in a panic. And all these critics do is endorse their respective politicians.”

Komurasaki did not deny this, but smiled coldly.

“That’s not all. Organizations linked to other countries also make payouts like these.”

“What, what do you mean by other countries?”

“I mean all of them. If you think it’s only one, you’d be sorely mistaken. America, China, Russia, South Korea, North Korea... the whole lot. One can obtain funding and various considerations and conveniences from them. Once you become addicted to the heady

feeling of access to these things, extracting yourself will be a tricky task indeed. As time passes, these people end up dictating the contents of the programming. Japan's media is now ruled by these people.

"My friends of the past have all fallen to that dark path," Komurasaki said. "And in truth, I'm the same. I was sent here by someone else to persuade you."

"That's terrible. No wonder you knew so much despite me saying nothing."

"Hmm. That's just how the world works. This trend has also led to people asking me to be an assistant professor. Still, there are pieces of news which exceed our predictions."

"What are those?"

"Things like the scoop you have. Things like footage of a Chinese fishing boat colliding with a patrol boat. These things have an extraordinary impact on people which view them. In the past, people laughed at the idea of the Chinese threat. But after that footage was made public? People started feeling the threat of China. Footage like that can have a decisive impact on the state of the world. Even the fiends in charge can't control that."

(TL Note: On the morning of September 7, 2010, a Chinese fishing trawler, the Minjinyu 5179, collided with Japan Coast Guard vessels in disputed waters about 12 km northwest of the Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands.)

"Was that why my scoop was suppressed?"

"Ah, that's right," Komurasaki nodded.

"Several days before the footage of that collision was released on the Net, it was secretly delivered to the media. Yet, the broadcast departments ignored it, so the person who provided it had no choice but to release it on the Internet. The person responsible at the broadcast department claimed he dumped the memory stick with the footage without viewing it, but do you actually believe that?"

"It makes no sense. If he thought what he was getting could be a big scoop, it would be impossible to just throw it away without viewing it. I know I would."

“Right? In my opinion, someone on top felt that letting it get out would be very bad news. The problem is who exactly felt this way. Now that his plans went up in smoke, that person is now frantically searching for the offender.”

Nanami was so shocked that she could not close her dropped jaw.

“Similarly, I think someone feels that this kidnap rescue operation is bad for business. Consider the successful recovery of a civilian kidnapped and taken as spoils of war. If this made the news now, government approval would instantly soar. Wouldn’t all their previous efforts go up in smoke?”

“So they’re suppressing my scoop too?”

Komurasaki nodded heavily, and ordered another beer.

“The people on top seem to think a change in power is desirable, so they’re supporting the opposition, but if the opposition has no ability to influence policy, then who will be responsible?”

“Ahhh. See, the important thing to them is not whether what they do is right or wrong, but whether it personally benefits them. Didn’t I say so just now? Their involvement goes very far. At this point, their objectives aren’t so much playing kingmaker as weakening Japan’s strength. To these people, what they want is a group of ineffective, powerless politicians leading Japan.”

“How could this be! Then, what have we... Komurasaki-san, now that you know this, what have you been doing?”

“I’m doing what I always do. I critique everyone, no matter who they are. How’s that, my convictions are still firm, no?”

Komurasaki smiled in a self-deprecating manner. Nanami gasped in surprise and asked:

“People who do nothing but criticize end up not taking any responsibility at all.”

“Correct. Criticizing everyone ends up being effectively the same as agreeing with everyone. You don’t have to get involved or take sides, so you become the fulcrum on

which the balance turns. Strictly speaking, it's similar to the Imperial Rule Assistance Association..."

With that, Komurasaki took another big swig of his beer.

"Among the current opposition, there are a lot of people who are famous, but not for doing anything special. These are all people who elevated themselves by pointing fingers at the failures of others. People with that mindset will immediately panic once they have to bear the responsibility for failure and frantically blame others for their mistakes. 'It was the guards' fault. It was all my adjutant's fault. It was all the fault of poor leadership by the previous incumbent, and so on. Excuses like this were heard then, they are heard now, and they will be heard forever. And you know what? The ultimate target of their hate is the people. It's not my fault. The people chose wrongly and this happened. Pol Pot did that. He felt he was right, and chose to educate everyone in the country in the way he liked. He did that by killing everyone who dissented against him.

"Knowing this, you're still going to be a critic, Komurasaki-san? When all the people hear is criticism, they'll end up having no faith in anything around them. How will you take responsibility for your attitude of 'it won't do, it's not perfect so it's no good'?"

"I know that. Nobody believes people like me anymore," Komurasaki sighed.

"You reap what you sow," Nanami muttered before gulping her beer down.

"What I wanted to say is, even if you have something you want to tell the world, the interplay of power and influence will constantly get in your way. The ad agencies, your superiors, the reporters' club, foreign national influence... all of these weave a complex web of relationships and power. We cannot do as we please."

"Then, what do you want me to do, after learning all this?"

"Amidst this tangled web of relationships and ties, I have chosen to become a critic, in order to free myself from any particular viewpoint. That's the only way to avoid becoming mired in subjectivity. But what will you do next? You have to decide. You can choose to tread in my footsteps, or you can choose to blaze a different path. There are many options and you may select from all of them."

"You want me to become a Martin Luther?"

(TL Note: Reformed the Christian Church in the 16th century)

“How could you be anyone that great? Still, ah, you could become one of his supporters, no?”

As Komurasaki said this, he handed Nanami a slip of paper.

“What’s this?”

There was a URL written on it.

“Take a look. It’s quite interesting.

When she lifted her head to look again, Komurasaki was gone.

She looked around, but there was no sight of him. Then she heard a door closing behind her. When she looked back, she saw Komurasaki’s back fading through the window glass.

“Oi, oi... is this a dine and dash? You want me to pay?”

Nanami looked at the bill, as if ‘tuition fee’ was written on it and cursed bitterly.



The URL Komurasaki had given Nanami was a blog which gathered news about the Special Region. It had been founded by a certain “Meganekko”... who turned out to be Noriko.

After returning home, she booted up her computer, connected to the Internet, and then stared at her monitor.

“This is amazing...” Nanami muttered

There was a lot of information there about the Special Region which had not been reported in the media, as well as raw commentary from the residents of the Special Region. Sadly, there were few visitors and the view counter hardly moved.

The blog also featured video that had obviously been taken by amateurs, demihumans of the Special Region.

She had started this blog because she desperately wanted to share the truth which the media did not report about. However, because she had not made her news interesting, it did not attract the eyes of the public.

Perhaps if Noriko had used her real name — made famous by magazines and mass communication — she would have received a lot of publicity. However, she had used a pseudonym instead, possibly because she detested gaining attention in that way.

When Nanami saw this, she felt that someone else had stolen her ideas for what she wanted to do. At the same time, she realized that even if she had done it herself, it might not have gone as smoothly as she had imagined.

Suddenly, she remembered what Komurasaki had said about eliminating the various influences at work in the world of reporting.

“Video. Explosive, impact-filled videos have power. However, it’ll take a lot of work to make the public watch videos which don’t have that quality. What should I do?”

Nanami began to understand why newsmakers would meddle with news, to distort and falsify it. And then she realised the reason why the editors — even if they did not go so far as to twist or fake news — would exaggerate it.

However, she could not do that. She did not want to do that.

“These are the facts. The facts should be spread without being colored by emotion.”

Nanami picked up her cell phone and silently dialled a number. It was well into the night and the person she was calling was most likely asleep, but Nanami did not care.

“Ah, Noriko-san. It’s been a while.”



Several days later, Noriko’s blog made it onto a lifestyle news variety show.

“I want to talk about a few interesting things in the Special Region.”

After hearing Nanami's explanation, the director said, "Well, it's not a bad thing," and gave his approval.

This decision was made to win her over, perhaps because he felt guilty about suppressing an exclusive scoop. In fact, he felt that the news on Noriko's blog was nothing much, little more than a presentation on the Special Region's culture and practices.

However, once she had everyone's attention, she released the gruesome sight of the black mist swallowing everything on Noriko's blog.

It struck a chord with the viewers, and they loudly demanded to know why such important news had not been reported.

The TV stations and newspapers frantically began their coverage. Their repeated reporting drew all their sources from Noriko's blog, because to do otherwise would imply that they had known about this beforehand but kept quiet.

And so, people finally learned about the oddities happening in various parts of the world.

CHAPTER 6

Itami Youji stood at rigid attention, wearing a neatly-ironed uniform that he had just taken back from the dry cleaners. His neck felt itchy, probably because he had forgotten to remove the dry-cleaner's tag inside the collar. Still, the circumstances compelled him to remain still. That was because several of the highest-ranking members of the JGSDF were seated before him.

Itami was but a junior officer in the JGSDF, and he had not even spoken to the majority of these people before. Thus, simply standing in front of them was a great source of stress for him. In addition, this was not a good place for him to be standing. After all, this was the Prime Minister's audience room, covered in a red carpet which made his hard leather shoes feel like they were sinking into the ground.

The massive wooden door radiated an aura of gravitas. The sound of approaching clamour came from the other side.

As he had expected, the people who came through were Prime Minister Morita, Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure, Foreign Minister Kanou, Defense Minister Natsume, among others.

“Thank you for waiting.”

With that, Prime Minister Morita sat down on the sofa.

Kanou, Natsume and Kogure took places around him. Morita's eye turned to Itami and he asked:

“You wrote this report, didn't you?”

“Yes. That's correct... is it bad?”

Morita stroked the twisted black frame of his glasses and flipped open the cover of the document he held.

The politicians sighed in unison. Everyone glanced at each other, and then looked to Foreign Minister Kanou.

Kanou was the only person here who truly understood him, who was his comrade. However, even Kanou looked uncomfortable, and spoke to Itami in leaden tones.

“Well, it’s not just bad. It’s very bad... your report is filled with good news and bad news. In all honesty, we have no idea how to respond to this. And then there’s a veritable mountain of issues we have to address. Thus, we invited you here, because everyone wants to speak with you.”

Kanou flipped through the file he had in hand.

“Let’s start with something simple. Thank you for undertaking the resource survey of the Special Region. The oil fields there are of startling proportions. Resource-wise, the mineral samples you’ve brought back are amazing finds. The researchers were grinning from ear to ear about them. If all goes well, we will no longer use the word ‘rare’ to describe them anymore. This is truly joyous news for our nation. Well done.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Next is the problem of the black mist that was blown up all over the Net... that Apo-somethingorother. We asked Youmei-sensei, but he didn’t quite understand it.”

“I don’t quite get it myself.”

“And then, there’s the mysterious cloud spreading from that Kunaptai place in the Special Region. The TV stations and newspapers ignored it at first, but they can’t ignore it anymore, and it’s caused quite a furore.”

“It’s Kunapnui, sir. And yes, if it continues spreading, the Special Region isn’t going to be a very fun place for anyone.”

The gathered people furrowed their brows at Itami’s phrasing. “Not fun” was one thing, but the report had stated “complete biological extinction”.

“Still, its relation to the Gate is unclear.”

Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure tossed the copy of the report onto the table before him.

"The report says this phenomenon was caused by the Gate. Is that not enough?" Prime Minister Morita answered.

"Of course not. Don't you think this might have been cooked up by the people of the Special Region to drive us away? Basically, they're trying to link a natural disaster to the Gate."

I see, that does make sense. Itami felt it was quite convincing.

"The person who said this was not an ordinary person, but a god."

"Let's not speak of them as gods. *That* party is always talking about cults and whatnot, it's a pain in the ass. Plus, the diplomats from religious countries are making a stink about designating living, breathing people who can speak directly as gods."

(TL Note: That party refers to the Japanese Communist Party)

"Is that from the time I was summoned before the Diet? It would seem everyone here's had a hard time."

"Well, for monotheists, they can close one eye to other religions worshipping in some place they don't know about. However, the idea that we, the authorities, would recognize someone who can actually speak of their own accord as a god makes them very upset. 'That's not God, the true God is our God' and then they start trying to interfere in things."

"But this is Japan, isn't it?"

"It's for diplomatic reasons - please understand. This has sparked debates on the existence of deities. It's not a matter of 'abandoning the Buddha and paying the gods no heed,'" Kanou said.

(TL Note: 仏ほつとけ、神構うな - acknowledge the gods, but do not revere them)

"But then, what should we call them?"

"Espers, maybe?"

"Haaa... because they have special abilities? And then, there's the explanation given by those espers..." Natsume said in frustration.

“Don’t you think that makes them sound even more suspicious? It’s like those TV specials about finding people with superhuman abilities.”

“Übermenschen?”

“Do you think this is some kind of kids’ sci-fi anime?”

“Oracles?”

“That sounds less believable and more suspicious.”

“Fairies?”

“As in, fairy tales?”

“Gods, then.”

“...I guess that works best.”

“So in the end, we’re still going with that?”

“Not like we’ve got better ideas. Let’s just use that term for now. When the Diet makes its official reply or when we have to commit this to official documentation, we’ll let the bureaucrats think up something.”

They looked forward to the imagination of the bureaucrats who had changed the Flame Dragon’s name to “Special Region Type A Dangerous Beast”.

“All right, we’ll do that. Let’s move on,” Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure said.

“Now, where were we? Right. America and the EU have gathered a great deal of money and manpower in preparation to explore and exploit the Special Region. These efforts have ground to a halt ever since these abnormal phenomena came to light.”

“Share prices have plunged and a crash looks imminent. The lobbyists pressured into exploring the Special Region by their backers have been caught off guard and can’t hide their confusion any further.”

Morita took the cue directed at him.

“Why did it end up like that?”

You don't even know that? Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure seemed to be saying as he looked at Itami.

“Simple. They're starting to worry that they won't make a return on their investment in the Special Region. If the Gate has to be closed, then the huge amount of capital they've committed will go up in smoke, no? However attractive that place might be, the investors will still be hounding them for some kind of return.”

“I see...”

“Of course, not everyone will be able to accept that. There's a lot of annoying people who are decrying this as some sort of scheme, that we're trying to monopolize the Gate and whatnot. These people even say that there's no link between this abnormality and the Gate. Never mind that we haven't released an official statement yet.”

Itami could only nod in response.

“...Well? Do you think you've fallen for an Imperial trick?”

Itami shook his head at Kogure's question.

“I don't think so. If they do have the ability to trigger a phenomenon that's as lethal as the report says, then there would be no need to do it there. They'd just hit Arnus and be done with it.”

Itami felt that if it were some sort of unconventional weapon (as in, nuclear, biological or chemical), the Empire's first target would be Arnus.

“Still, isn't Arnus 'holy ground' to them? Perhaps they feel they cannot pollute the land with such methods.

It would seem Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure thought that the Apocryph was some kind of Empire-created threat.

However, Itami felt that it was nonsense. The word “threat” was meaningless if it could not be explained in terms that others could understand. In addition, if the Apocryph could be deliberately triggered, then the Special Region Expeditionary Force would have to fundamentally reconsider their approach to combat. Depending on their circumstances, they might need to consider a general retreat. The consequences of such a phenomenon being generated in a concentration of JSDF personnel were too hideous to bear considering.

After one of the uniformed men seated nearby pointed out exactly that, Kogure amended his statement by saying, “Of course, I have considered that it might just be a freak natural occurrence.”

“However, minute changes in stellar alignment have also been detected here. Recently, Mt. Asama has also become active again. Perhaps the Apocryph is spreading somewhere on this side of the Gate as well. Concluding that it has nothing to do with the Gate is extremely dangerous. Even if we are not certain about the details, I hope we all agree that something has to be done.”

The Prime Minister, the Chief Cabinet Secretary, the JGSDF generals and the others launched into fiery debate.

Kanou — who was uninvolved — addressed Itami.

“...Ahhh. And so, opinions from all over the government go back and forth.”

“What a headache.”

“Indeed. The bigger headache is the proposal submitted by the Arnus Living Community.”

“Eh?”

This was the first time Itami had heard of anything from the ALC.

They should have discussed it with him before bringing it up with the Japanese authorities, so a sense of detachment — or was it surprise? — welled up within Itami.

“What sort of proposal was it?

Somewhere along the way, everyone present had turned to look at Itami. Some were even leaning forward. The fake smiles on their faces made him very uncomfortable.

Prime Minister Morita spoke in a grave tone.

“Miss Lelei La Lelena, who once came before the Diet as an expert witness, seems to have mastered some sort of technology concerning the Gate. She has also said that in exchange for certain conditions, she could assist in the reopening of the Gate.”

Itami’s jaw dropped.

“This, this is the first time I’ve heard of this. What are the conditions?”

“Firstly, they want us to accept the closure of the Gate. Well, if the Gate can be opened, then it can be closed. That’s fine.”

“After that, she wants us to curb the spread of technology and knowledge into the Special Region. The implication is that the Special Region has its own values, culture and mindset, and rapid changes in them are not a good thing.”

“I see.”

“Then, the next condition is...”

“Yes, that’s the part which is giving us the headache,” Kanou cut in.

“What, what is that?”

“Simply put, they want us to give them the JGSDF commander 1st Lieutenant Itami Youji.”

“Ehhhh... me?”

“Yes, you.”

Kanou punctuated the reply with a nod, and it froze Itami in place.



People's Republic of China, Beijing - Zhongnanhai

“Chair-Chairman Dong. I am here to submit my report.”

Liu's voice was off-key and hoarse.

It was not just his voice. He stood ramrod straight, his feet and hands trembling as though exposed in the bitterest cold. Sweat poured off his body like rain, and as a result the collar and armpits of his suit had changed color.

It was hot and intensely embarrassing. He knew he made a disgraceful figure. However, given the location, it could not be helped. After all, this was a special place.

Liu belonged to the National Strategy Department, an important component of the Chinese Communist Party, which sought to dominate Chinese people across the globe. However, the people seated before him were the six most important people in the Party. The imposing aura of dignity and gravitas they radiated made Liu feel his hands and feet were several times heavier than usual.

“Speak, then.”

Dong Dechou — in his centrally-located Chairman's seat — verified that the person before him was Liu, and then addressed him in a serious, formal tone.

“Ah, ah yes. Please, peruse this data.”

Liu opened his report and urged the bigwig before him to look through it.

His hope was that if everyone looked downward, he might be relieved of his tension. However, the elders — led by Dong — did not look away from Liu. They were carefully scrutinizing the man who had just spoken. This was because they felt that they understood people better than they did printed words on a page.

Of course, the speaker would end up feeling like he was being interrogated. But at the same time, it gave an air of seriousness to the proceedings, where levity and foolishness were not tolerated. Thus, while unpleasant, the speaker's tension improved the quality of the discourse.

Liu swallowed to moisten his throat before launching into the meat of the matter. However, his mouth felt as dry as a desert, and his tongue was like a dessicated sponge, refusing to yield up the slightest bit of moisture. When he swallowed, it was like gulping a mouthful of sand.

“There, there are reports in Japan about various oddities taking place due to the existence of the Gate. The news and media tried to quash this story at first, but now they are releasing articles criticising Prime Minister Morita for not taking action against it...”

“We do not need reports that we could obtain just as easily from the newspapers. You are not mere collectors of information, but espionage agents. What do you suggest we do in response to these developments?” Chairman Dong replied sternly, sounding like a denunciation.

In response to that merciless criticism, Liu practically screamed his answer:

“I, I feel that Japan is trying to monopolize the Special Region using these changes as an excuse! Thus I strongly advise against linking these changes to the Gate. Instead, we should advocate that a peaceful, perhaps international utilization of the Gate is in the best interests of the Japanese people. To that end, we will push our message forward through the news and the media. At the same time, if we begin interfering with avenues of peaceful resolution, the public opinion of the Japanese will eventually turn towards us.”

“Let’s get this straight. There is no such thing as friendship among nations. We might make the enemy believe such a thing exists, but we must never hope for it ourselves.”

“Allow me to correct myself. We will make sure they refrain from endangering the interests of our nation.”

It was for this purpose that China solicited investments from foreign enterprises, opened its markets, and dispenses resources. Once these enterprises set up shop in Japan, they and all the Japanese people working in them would become hostages, thus limiting Japan’s thinking, actions and choices.

“How goes the infiltration of the news and media. Will they act as we desire?”

“The journalist exchange agreement is proceeding well. They are self-censoring reports that are damaging to our country. They have cultivated the attitude of limiting exposure to anti-Chinese articles. There was a demonstration in Tokyo, about 4000 strong, against our country, but it passed without notice. This is arguably the ideal situation for ourselves. In addition, we have reminded the leaders of the companies which sponsor news channels and variety shows about the proper way to handle information concerning our country. They are keenly aware that if they wish to do business in our country, they will need to demonstrate their friendliness and willingness to cooperate.”

“Oh, that’s good. These must be the fruits of your labor. Still, it seems somewhat sedate. I would like to see your plan for increasing the intensity of the situation.”

“But, but, suggestions like that would contradict the responsibility I am tasked with.”

“I know. Taking grand actions may end up putting all our previous effort to waste. Even so, we may have to take them to protect our interests, so I want to hear what you have to suggest.”

“That, that means, we’re going to put on a show of force to intimidate Japan?”

After all, the Japanese media would have no choice but to air anti-Chinese news items if China decided to use gunboat diplomacy on Japan. For instance, if they did not report about the fishing boat colliding with a patrol boat, that would lead to the Japanese people losing all faith in them.

They had already worked to ensure that if anything happened, the media would not air anti-Chinese articles, but instead let it fade out of the public eye as soon as possible.

For instance, during the poisoned gyoza incident, as public interest in the topic began to wane, they trotted out women and children approving of good Sino-Japanese ties and published news items approving of friendliness and peace. Then, they interweaved news of capturing and dealing with the culprits in between the coverage of other big events. Before anyone knew it, all the blame had been pushed onto those people and the matter was at an end. Then they loaned out a panda or two and everyone was friendly with them again.

With this system in place, they could minimize the impact of many things, be it the Chinese police department’s reinterpretation of events, apologizing for blaming Japan

for everything, and even the lack of compensation for affected industries and victims. When dealing with Japan, they covered up their mistakes and left things at that. This was China's basic attitude towards problems.

Still, there were limits to how far that could go. For instance, if they actually tried to intimidate Japan with a show of force, that would stir up anti-Chinese sentiment in the Japanese people. Their reputation in the international community would also sink like a stone. If they did this and ended up crippling themselves for small gains, recovering from these setbacks would take a great amount of time.

That was precisely what Liu feared.

“If you think a show of force refers to military power, then you are mistaken. Gunboat diplomacy and the like are relics of the past century. We will make war in a brand new battlefield, and thus win the rights to the Special Region.”

“What, what would that be?”

The female secretary waiting in the corner advanced in silence and handed a bundle of documents to Liu.

Liu swiftly scanned through the topics.

“We call it, ‘Operation Ginza Red Flag’.”

Chairman Dong Dechou smiled to himself as he said so.

Liu gave it an once-over, and then he blanched.

“But, but... I don't think the US and the other nations will approve of this... it seems far too risky.”

“It's fine. There's not need to worry. Justice does not exist in the international community; only national interests. As long as your interests coincide with the other nation, you may do as you please. This is reality... all right, come with me. I'll introduce you to our guests, because you'll be working with them in the future.”

“Them?”

“Indeed,” Dong Dechou said as he rose from his seat and led Liu aside. There were several men waiting in the antechamber.

“This is Mr. Balanov of the Russian Federation. And this is Mr. Lucre from France. After that we have Mr. Brudges from England. Mr. Hwang of North Korea. Mr. Kim from South Korea. And finally, the US Presidential Secretary, Mr. Bremy.”

Liu shook hands with everyone Dong introduced, but he still gasped, “The Americans too?!” in an unbelieving tone.

He was so tense that he did not notice his voice going off-key.

“Correct. In this, we are in agreement. Does that not mean that we should work together as well?”

“Yes, yes, that’s right.”

“Of course, this is not an ironclad working relationship. We are all here for our own reasons and we must leave for our own reasons as well. Similarly, the conditions for continued cooperation are quite strict. We must take action boldly and carefully.”

“Yes, I believe that is so.”

“The reins for this operation must be placed in the hands of an excellent commander. Thus, I hope you will be the overall coordinator for this operation. Will you accept that position?”

This was an offer Liu could not refuse, so he bowed crisply in acknowledgement. Upon seeing this, Dong Dechou smiled smugly.

“Now, Japan will be fighting on all sides.”

(TL Note: the term is 四面楚歌, referring to the battle of Gaixia)



Ibaraki Prefecture, Kasumigaura

Itami stood on the shores of the lake, looking up the sky and the huge fluffy white clouds floating up there.

He saw a speck of white in the endless azure. He heard the sound of engines from the distance. When he raised his binoculars and looked through them, he saw a civilian propellor plane.

“Oh!”

Through his binoculars, he saw several red and white-striped points scatter from the civilian aircraft, taking flight into the clear blue sky.

These points were currently falling towards Itami’s current location.

They were falling so fast that he could not track them through the high-power magnification of his binoculars. Thus, Itami put them down and waited until he could see them with the naked eye.

A moment later, kite-like objects bloomed into existence one after the other. They then drifted slowly towards him.

Itami did not look back to Yao standing behind him, but said:

“It’s a long time to stand here while craning your neck. You don’t have to keep hanging around.”

“No. I want to be by your side.”

Itami felt a little embarrassed by Yao’s words, and he scratched his head while saying, “really now”. To him, those words could be taken as a vow of eternal companionship.

“Forget it, she was probably just exaggerating.”

To the long-lived Yao, dating Itami for life was hardly a big deal. Perhaps it would only feel like a couple of years to her. Just as Itami was thinking about that, Yao suddenly asked:

“Do you find me bothersome? I sometimes fail to get a hint; if you wish to be alone, please, tell me.”

“It’s not like that.”

“Wonderful... although, everyone’s flying quite well.”

Yao looked to the sky and then a shiver ran down her spine, as though a cold wind had blown.

“I keep thinking about what would happen if the parachute didn’t open, or if the straps broke, or if the wind blew me into the lake, and so on.”

Because I have bad luck. Yao squeezed the 50 yen coin Itami had given her.

Itami understood how Yao felt, and nodded.

“I wonder why everyone’s having so much fun?”

“It’s natural to think that way. It looks pretty boring from down here.”

In truth, skydiving did not seem very impressive to onlookers. Perhaps it would be different if there was a team of professionals performing aerobatics and a cunning array of stunts, but Itami and Yao were merely waiting for the skydivers to make landfall, so it was very boring.

That said, that was only because they could not see the airborne skydivers with their naked eyes.

Pina descended through the air, held from behind by a professional skydiving coach. When she saw Itami, she waved her arms enthusiastically at him.

“Itami-dono~!”

They landed in a glide. Once she touched down, Pina ran to Itami, all smiles and beaming like a child.

“It was awesome, so awesome, Itami-dono! To think such wonders existed in our world!”

“Your, your Highness... this isn’t our world...”

Hamilton had landed alongside Pina. She approached them on shaky legs after thanking her coach.

“Right. This is another world... ahhh, there’s so many wonderful things in this world. Why was I not born here? The moment when we passed through the clouds was lovely!”

Following them, Rory, Tuka and Lelei landed.

After separating from their skydiving coaches, they eagerly babbled about how wonderful it felt to walk through the sky. Even the typically quiet Lelei’s eyes were glowing, as though to show her delight.

“Aren’t you jumping, Itami-dono?”

“Nah, I’ll pass.”

“Could it be that even Itami-dono, one of the renowned Men In Green, is afraid of jumping? ...Well, Hamilton whined a lot on the way up, but she seemed quite happy once she was airborne.”

“...You didn’t think she was just scared speechless in the air?”

“Then, did you find it boring?”

“No. It was truly a wondrous experience.”

Hamilton placed her hands onto her chest as if she was replaying her feelings in her mind.

“Although, before we jumped, I still couldn’t bring myself to believe how a chunk of metal could float in the sky.”

At that time, Hamilton looked like she was on the verge of crying and screamed “How scary”.

“Say, say, Itami-dono, how about joining us next time? Hey, what do you think?”

Itami sensed Pina was bugging him in order to fly again.

“I appreciate your kind offer, but please permit me to refuse.”

Itami wanted to impress the cost of skydiving upon this Crown Princess-sama, who had no idea of the meaning of money.

“Why is that? Do you dislike accompanying me?”

“...In all honesty, I just don’t understand the appeal of this sort of thing.”

As Itami fumbled around for an excuse, Yao was chuckling behind his back as she covered her mouth.

“Do you know something?”

Tuka — who looked happy, like she had just waltzed with a wind spirit — pressed Yao for details. After Lelei and Rory joined in as well, Yao muttered, “I can’t say this out loud” before whispering to them.

“In truth, Itami-dono is afraid of heights.”

“Ahhhhh! You promised to keep it secret! And you’re scared of heights too!”

In response to that, Yao proudly puffed her chest up.

“Indeed, I fear heights. But that is because my luck is bad and leads to accidents! I’m not afraid like you are.”

“Let’s get this out of the way first. I can ride in helicopters or transport planes. I’m very familiar with rappelling, and I’ve done my share of combat jumps. I’m just afraid of Wyverns.”

“Oh? Really? Then who was the one hugging me and screaming back then?”

“Ah, well, I was holding tightly onto Yao, but I was afraid of the Wyvern...”

“Then why didn’t you go skydiving?”

As Rory and Tuka pressed him, Itami mumbled, “Er, I er, because, of, uh...”

“Pret~ty fishy~”

“Were you lying about parachute jumping? Father, take some responsibility here.”

“It’s not a lie!” Itami wailed, before narrating his black history to them.



"I did jump. Really. But I hated it, so I clung to the jumpmaster and refused to let go. In the end my commander and the jumpmaster went, "Get your ass out of here" and they kicked me out the door."

The fear of heights could take many forms. In Itami's case, he feared having nothing to hold on to. Ropes were fine and anything he could hold onto would be acceptable. But without them, his fears would surge forth.

It was only natural to wonder why someone like him could have a paratrooper badge, but there was a reason for that.

After people shouted "What kind of SFG trooper doesn't have a paratrooper badge?!" he had been shoved off a perfectly good aircraft five times and obtained it. Naturally, there were still some SFG commanders who still resented Itami for it.

Whenever he tried to run away from things he did not like, people would point at the badge of his chest and scold him, "Aren't you a Ranger?! Aren't you Special Forces?!" Even so, Itami still tried to flee those unpleasant tasks. Eventually, one of Itami's previous commanders handed down the secret of controlling him.

"You can forget about ever taking leave again, particularly at the beginning and end of the year and during summer!"

"Ehhhhh! But why?!"

"If you don't want that to happen, act like you deserve that badge on your chest!"

Indeed, it was because of these experiences that Itami no longer wore his badge on his uniform.

If not for the Ginza incident, Itami would probably have been forcibly enrolled into free-fall courses, at which point he would seriously have considered a change in vocation.

However, the girls found this aspect of his terribly entertaining. He was the ideal target for their bullying.

They teased Itami about how he did not join them because he could not understand the joys of the sky.

In the end, Itami had to cajole them into moving on, saying “Hurry up and change, time’s right and we need to get in the microbus.”

Next, they would be heading to a Ministry of Defense research institute.

Once they left Kasumigaura airport, black limousines surrounded their microbus from all directions. It begged the question, “what kind of VIP would ride a microbus, anyway?”

As she saw this, Rory muttered: “I remember what happened the last time came here...”

Lelei, Tuka and Pina nodded.

“Well, that was because our movements were leaked to one and all, so everyone’s eyes were on us...”

In response to Itami’s words, the man in black seated at the seat beside the driver’s turned around, saying “Sorry about leaking your location to all and sundry... it’s been a while.”

Itami asked the man addressing them: “Who’re you?”

“You can’t tell? I’ve lost a lot of weight.”

The man — who resembled Dr. Shinigami from Kamen Rider — introduced himself as Komakado. He had been their point of contact with the local police when Itami had first led his group to Tokyo.

“Ohhh! It’s been a while. What happened to your waist after that?”

“Ah, how shall I put it... My cane’s a part of me now.”

Komakado glared hatefully at the halberd Rory was holding. Seeing how a young girl like herself held it with such ease, he had decided to snatch it up unawares. In the end, he had sprained his waist and given himself a hernia, resulting in an ambulance call.

“Well, let’s just forget about it.”

“Aye. Well, I understand. Still, I heard that security preparations are being handled by the police this time. Komakado-san, you’re from Intelligence Branch; what are you doing here?”

“Ah, my secondment period is over. I’m a department chief in the Public Security Division now.”

“Oh! You’ve risen through the ranks. Congrats.”

“No no, that’s largely thanks to you. We managed to round up all the foreign spies in Ginza in one fell swoop...”

“Really?”

“Really. If you didn’t notice, then never mind.”

Komakado chuckled as he said this. For some reason, it sounded like a villain’s evil laugh. He seemed kinder when he had been plumper. His bearing now had a negative effect on his image.

One could see the reed-choked shores of Lake Kasumigaura through the windows. The technology institute was further down the road. Komakado paused briefly to bring his digital communicator to his mouth.

“Status report.”

“Intersection here, everything’s fine.”

Reports streamed in from various location. It would seem they had taken very tight measures, given the prior leaks. After acknowledging the reports, Komakado looked at Itami.

“There’s a fundamental difference between the level of security now and last time. We’ve even had policewomen cosplay as the girls here and sent them strolling around with someone who looks like you to Akihabara or Nagata-cho. There’s another microbus behind us as well.”

Komakado pointed behind himself as he said this.

“I haven’t even been told the reason you’re here. Why are you here?”

“To conduct a Gate-opening experiment.”

Itami was momentarily confused over whether to tell someone who had not been otherwise informed. Just for once, he wanted to say, “that’s on a need to know basis, and you don’t need to know”, or some other similarly overacted line. However, Lelei, who was sitting to the side, shattered Itami’s fantasies with her simple answer.

“A Gate-opening experiment? You mean to say that men can make portals between this world and others?”

“It could be.”

Komakado looked like nothing in the world could have shocked him more.

“Unbelievable...”

Everybody in the world understood the utility of the Special Region. If word got out that there was a way to freely open a way to the Special Region, and that the strange phenomena plaguing the world could be eliminated, everyone in the world would reach to Japan for a handout.

“You need to be very cautious about this information. Do you understand me?” Komakado told the policeman driving.

“I, I understand.”

“You are not to speak of this to anyone; not your parents, your siblings, your girlfriend, your superiors, *nobody*. Do you understand?”

“I understand, sir!” the policeman practically shouted in reply.

“Good. Then, we’ll have the decoys head toward Ginza as planned.”

In response to Komakado’s order, the microbus trailing them turned left towards Tokyo, taking a lot of police escort vehicles with them. Even if someone pursued them,

the long motorcade would be very distracting and they would probably not notice the microbus moving ahead of them.

“Now, even if someone is observing, it’ll look like the VIPs from the Special Region are returning to Ginza after skydiving.”

“Wouldn’t *that* be nice~”

Rory’s nonchalant reply was laced with sarcasm, and Komakado smiled back to her, unwilling to admit defeat.

“Well, I didn’t think it would be settled so easily. The path ahead is kind of uncertain.”

In fact, the space behind them had cleared up now that the heavy police escort had vanished. There were no more cars on the road besides the ones that occasionally passed them from the front. Rural roads would be like this outside of traffic jams.

Before long, they could see the Ministry of Defense Research Institute. It was comprised of clean white buildings on an open field. They were actually pretty big structures, though the sprawling surroundings might have given viewers a false impression.

The microbus did not enter through the main gate, but took an unpaved, narrow road that was something like a trail running between rice paddies, and thus it entered the grounds from a side gate. Perhaps it was because his tension had been running high, but when the side gate closed, Komakado exhaled deeply.

“Hooo... Well, nothing happened this time.”

Yup, very tense.

The microbus entered an area surrounded by buildings.

Men in black were gathered there, awaiting Itami and his entourage.

“You’ve come at last, Lelei-san. Everyone, did you enjoy your leisure time in the air?”

Prime Minister Morita, Secretary Kogure and the others stepped forward, each shaking Lelei’s hand.

“Thank you. I had a lot of fun thanks to you,” Lelei replied primly. After all, she had heard that their entertainment had been paid from the Prime Minister’s pocket money. While it was more likely that the money had been drawn from a secret government account, stating that the PM had paid for them would change their impression of him. It was a truly devious maneuver.

Tuka thanked them for their warm reception, and expressed her worry that they were imposing upon them. In response, Morita smiled and said:

“Hardly, hardly. Such petty matters pale in comparison to your importance. Ahahaha~”

There was no anger in his laughter. *Had he really dug into his pockets for them*, Itami wondered.

Kanou approached him and asked, “How about them? Did they have fun?”

“Aye, they did.”

“If we can make them associate this enjoyment with cooperating with Japan, that’s a win for us. That’ll be their motivation to open the Gate. Same with your matter.”

“...Ah, Kanou-san. Are you serious about that?”

“You mean, handing you over to them? We haven’t decided that yet. It comes after we settle the matter of the Gate.”

Itami patted his chest and sighed in relief.

“If we have to close the Gate, I was thinking of ordering you to gather information in the Special Region, while taking charge of that Lelei girl’s security.”

“So you want me to be another Lieutenant Onoda?”

Near the end of the Pacific theatre of World War II, when the IJA was retreating, Hiroo Onoda-shi had been ordered to stay on Lubang Island to collect information. After the war ended, he continued his lonely crusade. About 30 years had passed before his

former commander informed him that World War II had ended and personally relieved him of duty.

...The Gate was closed, and the Special Region Expeditionary Force of the JSDF was no longer there. But Itami remained by himself. And after the Gate opened again, decades had passed.

Itami's body went weak as he imagined that future ahead of him.

"I hope you can consider it with an SF trooper's mindset. Don't these plots appear in light novels? Time passes differently for astronauts due to the Urashima effect and so on. Even so, the MC boldly sets forth, for the sake of all mankind.

They would probably receive someone like Kanou with a WELCOME sign or something. That would be a nice trope. For an otaku, paying his entire life to serve his nation would probably be par for the course.

"So nobody's going to ask my opinion?"

"Didn't I say this was an order?"

"But you're the Foreign Minister now, Kanou-san."

"Very well. Then I shall issue that order in the name of the Prime Minister's Office. If need be, I can get Defense Minister Natsume and the Joint Chiefs of Staff to sign off on it as well. Or will I need to continue down the chain of command until I reach your immediate superior?"

"Can I hand in a resignation?"

"We won't fire you and we won't let you quit either."

"I'm glad you think so highly of me, but I think you're overrating my abilities. Work, to me, is mainly there so I can have fun. I'd rather avoid situations where I'd have to miss out on Comic Markets. You know how their stuff sells out in a flash."

However, Kanou paid Itami no heed as he continued:

“The fact is, the organizers of the Comic Markets have been saying that they have many copies of sample doujins which they want to donate to a national art museum. However, we need to vet the content first and sort them by their content. So we’re planning the construction of a repository to hold the anime and manga which are an important cultural legacy of our nation.”

“So you’re building a public facility like that, huh... well, you may want to build a shrine to manga, but the moral guardians will whine about it being a state-sponsored manga cafe. And... well, what does that have to do with me?”

“In any case, I wanted to say that if you were worried about losing contact with us during your time in the Special Region, you don’t have to worry. All the doujins released during that period will be stored there for everyone to read. Who knows, you might be able to spend years binging on the archives.”

“Really?! ... Ah, I mean...”

Itami’s sudden shriek of excitement had drawn everyone’s eyes. After an incredibly fake cough, Itami’s voice dropped an octave.

“Kanou-san. You must have forgotten because you haven’t been to those markets. You must have forgotten the feeling of joining a long queue, wading through the sweat and passion-laden sea of humanity with both hands, strolling past the booths and being approached by people asking you to ‘please have a look’, as well as the joy of flipping through doujin pages and savoring the beautiful cosplayer girls.”

“What are you talking about? To me, the Special Region seems like a never ending Comics Market. Doesn’t that passion burn in the Special Region — specifically, in Arnus?”

“...Eh?!”

“You should know that, right? Isn’t living over there more comfortable?”

“That, that’s not...”

That’s not true, Itami wanted to say, but in the end he could not finish that sentence.

He knew he was being baited by Kanou, but he did not feel Kanou was wrong. At the very least, he was waiting for the results of this experiment because he was afraid that he would not be able to come and go from the Special Region.

If Comics Markets could be held in the Special Region, he might consider moving there, like Kurata had.

“You’re an important person to them, so they’ll try to find some way to stay in touch with Japan for your sake. You’ll have to wait a while to weather the time storms or earthquakes or whatnot and wait for them to calm down, but only this time round. After that, the opening and closing should not be a problem. I understood that much from her explanation.”

With that, Kanou inclined his chin toward Lelei and the others, who were walking along the corridor.

“Still, isn’t that very bad?”

“Frankly speaking, it is. But if this goes on, we won’t be able to invest in the Special Region any more. So I think it’s best that we hash it out right now, at this time.”

“Still, we’re not sure if the Gate can be successfully opened...”

“Precisely. Everything turns on that. That’s what the experiment we’re conducting is meant to prove. In addition, there are many things we need to discuss with the ALC, as well as how secret we’re going to keep it. If the US and China and whoever find out, they’ll probably demand the Gate be opened on their side. That being the case, that girl Lelei is now a national defense secret. However, if we keep it a secret, mentioning the closure of the Gate will incur massive opposition. Once that happens, we’ll have to hint to the other allied countries that we can open the Gate again. That part will be a very delicate balancing act.”

“Indeed.”

“Still, it’s not all bad. We might be able to travel to worlds other than the Special Region. Of course, we have to consider how best to do this while taking into consideration Gothic Lolita-san’s warning to strictly regulate the spread of knowledge and information here into the Special Region. When you think about how the North

American colonists annihilated the Native Americans' culture and practices, her point starts to make a lot of sense..."

Itami and the others listened to this explanation as they walked, until they reached something like a huge hangar.

It was a vast, windowless space, roughly four to five stories tall, with no windows. It felt familiar to Itami; it reminded him of the Tokyo International Exhibition Center. (TL Note: I.e. the Tokyo Big Sight at Ariake, where Comikets are held)

However, he did not see folding tables there.

"Ah, it's a Shinshin."

(TL Note: This refers to the Mitsubishi X-2 Shinshin; an experimental aircraft.)

There was a mockup of an experimental stealth fighter here, as well as kinetic kill vehicles designed to interdict medium-range ballistic missiles, among other things.

Technicians in white one-piece coveralls stood at the edge of this testing ground, arranging cameras and machinery to surround a central platform.

The floor was covered in tapes marking off squares in a grid pattern.

A frame of white ropes — resembling a jungle gym — hung in the air, also forming a grid pattern.

They brought Lelei to the center of the elevated platform. There were familiar faces among the researchers near her.

"Ah, Professor Youmei."

"Ohh, you're here. I heard they were going to conduct an experiment concerning the Gate, and I was beside myself in anticipation, so I came over promptly. Although, it seems to be some sort of top secret matter and I had to sign an oath of some sort... the point is I can't talk about it right?"

Urushibata and Shirai were there as well, waving to them.

Elsewhere, a female technician was attaching electrodes to Lelei's head and various parts of her body.

Lelei did not seem to mind. Instead, she eagerly asked, "What are these for?" and nodded as she received her answer.

As the preparations proceeded apace, the government officials — headed by PM Morita — gathered around as well.

"It's rare that we're all gathered at a place like this," Itami muttered. After all, the people here were the sort he would normally only see in the papers and news.

"Idiot, it shows how important this experiment is."

Following Kanou's words, Defense Minister Natsume added, "The handling of the Gate will shape Japan's future. Should we preserve the Gate or close it temporarily? The opposition will surely use our response as a talking point."

After that, Morita growled his annoyance.

"Why not make her existence public? That way it'll make persuading them much easier."

"Please reconsider, Prime Minister! The situation will deteriorate if that happens."

"No, I don't meant officially. I mean, through rumors and other such channels. Something like, 'We have acquired the technology to open Gates' or something similar."

"In other words, our official stance is that we know nothing?"

"Correct."

Even so, that would be a very dangerous development. It would lead to all manner of conjectures, and might worsen the situation.

"We will begin the experiment shortly. All personnel to your instruments and stations. Five. Four. Three..."

Everyone watched Lelei with bated breath.

Lelei closed her eyes, and incanted a monophonic verse which sounded like a pigeon whistle.

“Please look, the subject’s brain wave patterns are showing surprising changes.”

“The amplitude is off the scales. It’s as though she’s having an epileptic seizure... to think she could remain conscious through all this.”

“Probably because it’s limited to part of the cerebrum.”

Not every part of the EEG display was flickering wildly. Other parts showed no changes at all.

“...Two. One. Contact!”

With the merest of movements, Lelei opened a Gate to another world before the onlookers.



It looked like a pool suspended in mid-air.

One could still glimpse the scenes of this world through the other side. It was only when one drew close that one could see it. In other words, it was like a glass windowpane. Its surface rippled slightly; unlike glass, it appeared visually soft.

“Is that the Gate? It seems much different from the one in Ginza. Smaller, too.”

“The stone structures were built to stabilize and anchor the Gate. This is the true form of the Gate. I can’t sustain it for long with my power alone; this much is my limit...”

The researchers nodded and said, “I see...” as they heard Lelei. They approached the surface, bringing their faces closer to investigate.

Someone blew at it, to see if it would raise ripples on its surface. However, there was no reaction. *Whatever caused those vibrations had nothing to do with air movement*, they reasoned.

Youmei swiftly produced a long rod.

“Allow me to take a look... hm.”

He poked the tip of the rod into the rippling surface, and then slowly pressed it in. The rod met no resistance, but vanished where it contacted the interior of the surface. He pulled it back, and found that its length was the same, with no changes.

“I see...”

However, nobody dared touch it, or look past the other side. This time, they prepared a camera on a long boom and inserted it. It might have been that the other side was too damp, but the video signal they got was blurred and whited-out, so they could not make out much.

“Hang on.”

One of the technicians sprayed something on the lens to ward off condensation and then inserted the camera again, but they got the same results.

“Maybe it was obscured by mist?”

If that was the case, they would have to send someone over to take a look.

The onlookers traded meaningless dialogues like “You go,” “No, you can be first.”

Behind the white-clad men, Itami approached Lelei.

“Lelei. Where did you connect to?”

“I don’t know. I picked a world close to us.”

“Is it different from the Special Region... from your world, Lelei?”

“You can’t open multiple portals to the same world.”

Lelei explained it by saying that a tangent only ever touched a circle at one point along its length.

“I see, so does this mean you can link the Special Region to our world?”

“However, I need a marker to find a particular world among all the others...”

Following that, Youmei said, “Let me handle the groundwork for that. We’ll use a pure crystal, without any imperfections. The more valuable, the better, and it needs to be an ancient object. I guess we could mine something like that.”

“I see...”

After Itami said that, he casually approached the Gate and said, “I’ll take a look before sticking his head in.

The sight of a man’s body missing its head from the neck up was highly disturbing to the onlookers. The severed... that is, the remaining portion of the neck looked like a sectional slice of a human specimen, which only added to the effect. One of the female researchers saw this ghastly sight and immediately fled to the corner of the experimental area with her hand clutched over her mouth.

“Huh, looks like medical science has progressed once again,” someone mused.

“Not just that. Surgery is going to become something truly incredible.”

Itami had no idea that the insides of his body were on review. Instead he muttered, “Where is this” and stepped forward, and his body disappeared from the sight of his audience.

Before long, a pale-faced Itami stumbled out the portal and shouted, “Lelei! Close the Gate now! Now! Now! Now! That world’s really fucking bad news!”

“What happened?”

Kanou’s question echoed the thoughts of the gathered politicians.

“There were eggs about this size... all lined up in a row, and when I got near them, they opened up like buds...”

Itami stumbled over his description of the human head-sized eggs, arranged in neat rows on a sticky floor.

As they heard this, the faces of the technicians and the politicians blanched, as they imagined the SF film which matched Itami's description.

"Terminate the experiment! Lelei-san, please close the Gate!"

"Security! Converge on Experimental Area Four! It may be too late! Hurry! Hurry!"

"Too late! Seal the entrances and exits to the building! Everyone, please be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for Japan's sake. Contact the people outside — tell them that if communication with the interior is interrupted for more than 24 hours, they are to destroy this building immediately. This is a direct order from the Minister of Defense."

As Natsume thunderously addressed the entire building, Lelei tilted her head in bafflement, but complied with the request and stopped maintaining the portal.

The translucent membrane before her vanished in an instant.

At the same time, an earthquake rocked the facility. It was roughly magnitude 2.0. Since the shocks were not that great, Itami paid it no heed, but instead turned to Lelei.

"...Haaa... haaa... haa... Lelei, don't open portals to other worlds for the time being. Especially that world. From now on, do not ever link to it. We'll all be doomed."

In that moment, everyone realised that they could not blindly make contact with unknown worlds.

Since it had ended without incident for the time being, they breathed a sigh of relief. But the matter did not end there.

"Oh, oi, what's this?!"

Two heavily-muscled men in black lifted him up by the elbows, while two more grabbed his legs, for a total of four people controlling his limbs.

Looking around, he saw many people in white and men in black surrounding him in ranks. Their blank faces were like machines, and the lack of humanity frightened him.

Natsume coldly stated: "Begin examination immediately. We must verify if he has been infected by any parasites!"

Itami was dragged to the corridor.

"No, I, I'm fine! There's nothing stuck on me! It's true! I, I've been framed!"

Itami thrashed and screamed, but that only made the people present even more suspicious.

"Why framed?"

Natsume had no idea, and so Kanou replied,

"Well, that was the promise I made to him."



Sherry learned about this news while playing with Myui at the Emperor's side.

Since she was familiar with the young heiress of House Formal, the Emperor had put them together and said, "You two should get along; your ages are close, after all."

The aged Emperor was delighted to see Myui and Sherry playing together by his side.

Being weak and ill, the Emperor was practically bedridden. It would seem he compensated for his immobility by watching the girls playing energetically in the distance, and it calmed his heart.

Myui — who had been orphaned at a young age — seemed to enjoy playing by the Emperor's side. He felt like her grandfather. Thus, she visited the Emperor's bedchamber almost every day, sometimes reading stories, sometimes reciting poems. Of course, Sherry was not one to let a chance like that go by. In the guise of a child curious about politics, she asked the Emperor questions or let him speak, looking for a chance to fulfil her ambitions.

“Your Majesty. This one feels that continued resistance to Zorral-sama is only possible through cooperation with Nihon.”

“I feel the same way too. Still, whether with Nihon or with our own people, we cannot pledge alliance rashly. Do you know the reason why?”

“Yes. This is because yesterday’s enemies will not be today’s friends.”

“Correct. Thus, we must sign a peace treaty first.”

“Then, what do you think of early peace talks?”

“It is difficult to say at the moment. We name ourselves the official government, but in truth we only rule over a portion of the Empire. We cannot even pay the compensation Nihon demands of us.”

“Thus, Zorral-sama is an obstacle to that. But the help of Nihon is needed to eliminate Zorral-sama... it is like locking a box’s key inside it.”

“Precisely.”

“Would the Nihonjin consider reducing the amount of reparations demanded?”

“That would be difficult. The Nihon ambassadors seem quite smug. We will need to cool their head down to get them to make concessions to us.”

“Are the elections in Nihon such an opportunity?”

“It is hard to say. The candidates speak boldly to gain the support of the people. Anyone who speaks without confidence will find it hard to be elected. Because of that, their terms after the election might be stricter than before. Thus, if we concede to them, their demands of us will only be more severe.”

“Still, will the people of our country not be delighted to know that we are guiding the war towards its end?”

“The question now concerns the terms on which the war ends.”

“In other words, the challenge is to concede within the Empire’s capacity to give in and thus secure the ambassador’s approval, then? Why don’t we hold a triumph for them, then? We cannot give them anything material, so let’s offer them fame.”

“Oh, I see. A triumph, then. But what if it decreases faith in the power of the Empire?”

“Can we not restore it by defeating Zorzar-sama?”

Just then, a knocking came from the door of the Emperor’s bedchamber.

Sherry and Myui hurriedly burrowed under the Emperor’s bed.

The fact was that their presence there was a secret to everyone around them. Earlier, when Count Marx had found them, he shouted, “Why are you taxing His Majesty’s weak constitution further!?” The Emperor had already given his approval, so it should have been fine, but the imperial physician disliked children and assumed the Emperor felt the same way, and his directions had been given with that bias in mind.

Thus, whenever someone came by, the two of them would conceal themselves. However, their hearts soared, like they were playing a prank. The Emperor seemed to indulge in their joy at hiding.

However, this time it was Count Marx and the head maid of House Formal who came.

“Your Majesty, your servant has received news of a matter of grave import; I wish to swiftly make my report.”

The two seemed to be in a panic. They advanced before the Emperor and began speaking.

Panache, who had been assigned to collect information in Arnus, had sent a report over. It stated, “There have been verified sightings of the phenomenon known as the Apocryph.”

In Japan, people were still discussing the link between the Gate and the phenomena. The debate over whether or not to close the Gate in order to prevent the spread of the Apocryph was currently in progress.

However, the Emperor smiled and said, “It hardly bears mentioning.”

The eavesdropping Sherry felt the same way. After all, Japan had not received anything from the Empire. Even if they decided to close the Gate, it would only happen after they had received compensation from the Empire.

“Pina said nothing, didn’t she? She must have felt that there was nothing to report.”

“Also, there is more alarming news. This is a personal letter from Hamilton-dono to Panache-sama.”

This time, it was the head maid’s turn to speak.

“Hamilton? ...I believe she is Pina’s personal assistant.”

Why did the head maid know about that personal letter? The Emperor wondered worriedly.

“Is it better if I did not ask how you obtained it?”

The head maid fearfully bowed and replied, “I pray you will not be offended.”

“According to that letter, Pina-denka has lost all passion for politics. Thus, even important information now languishes within her hands.”

“What sort of information is that?”

“For instance, that a certain magician who lives in Arnus has received the power to open Gates from the Queen of the Underworld, Hardy.”

“What?!”

The supine Emperor suddenly bolted upright. After the two of them carefully eased him into a sitting position, he asked again to see if he was hearing things.

“If that is so, then the situation is grave.”

Sherry also felt that something bad had happened.

This was an untimely occurrence for the official Imperial administration. More to the point, the same applied to her. This was a highly classified matter concerning the government of Italica. In other words, just knowing about it was very dangerous.

Of course, since Myui was here too, the life of the heiress to House Formal would probably be guaranteed. However, it was quite likely that they would be sequestered for a long period of time.

That implied that she would be separated from Sugawara. It was a situation she desperately wanted to avoid. To Sherry, it was nothing less than a matter of life and death.

“What’s the matter?”

Sherry raised an index finger to silence Myui, who knew nothing of what was going on. After that, she decided to crawl out from under the Emperor’s bed so as not to be spotted by the head maid and Count Marx. If she left the bedroom and ran to Sugawara’s side, at least she would not have to be worried about being separated from him.

However, just as she was about to emerge from under the bed, Emperor Molt’s hand rested lightly on Sherry’s shoulder.

“You wait here a bit.”

Count Marx and the head maid glimpsed Sherry’s form and mouthed “Dammit”. Their eyes were downcast, and it was obvious that they were considering the elimination of the witness. But then Myui revealed herself too, and the head maid’s face went pale. If she were to do to Myui what she planned to do to Sherry, she would be committing treachery.

“Hang on, hang on.”

As though sensing the head maid’s thoughts, the Emperor raised a finger and stopped her with a “Don’t be hasty.”

“Do you know who this magician is and where they are? Can you get them under control as soon as possible?”

The head maid replied with a sour face: "Regretfully, I am unaware of both their identity and location. However, Pina-denka might know..."

Count Marx said, "Your Majesty. Judging by the Nihonjin's thinking, if they can open the Gate at will, they might lean toward minimizing the risk to themselves."

"So we must swiftly treat with Japan and settle the matter. Who else knows about this in Italica?"

Marx and the head maid looked at Sherry and Myui.

Thus, the Emperor bade Sherry rise to her feet.

"Judging by the way you were planning to leave, I believe you understand the gravity of the situation."

"...Yes."

Sherry shrank into herself, like a child who had been scolded for a prank.

"Tell me how severe it is."

There was no point hiding things now. Sherry shared her opinion as requested.

The legitimate Imperial government could continue resisting Zorzar's forces thanks to the presence of the JSDF. If the JSDF was not there, the militarily inferior legitimate government would be destroyed by Zorzar's armies, and the pro-peace faction would be purged once more.

What if the pro-peace nobles heard about this?

"Rather than perish with their countries, they would scatter to the four winds and throw themselves upon Zorzar-sama's mercy. The Imperial government would thus be dissolved."

"Umu. It seems you understand," the Emperor nodded.

"Then, can you accept being placed in confinement and having no contact with anyone else?"

Sherry had anticipated those words from the Emperor, and so she raised a finger to interrupt the Emperor.

“I have a solution.”

Surprised, the Emperor asked, “Oh? And what is that?”

“Make up swiftly with the Nihonjin and beg them to help us defeat the Zorzar faction. Then, we will agree to any terms they state, contingent on us taking back the Imperial Capital. Of course we will ask them to reduce the reparations due, but I am sure they will accept us turning over mines and territorial deeds in exchange. In this way, they might not need to close the Gate, or even if they do close the Gate, they might leave troops with us.”

“Oh, and why do you think that?”

“This is because being able to open the Gate again is a risky gamble for the Nihonjin. They will surely consider that they may lose contact with us forever after closing the Gate.

The fact was that Sherry had worried about precisely this sort of thing. Since she did not want to be parted from Sugawara, she had been racking her brains for a solution. If there was nothing else, she planned to cling to Sugawara’s thigh and beg him to take her to Japan, but that was a last resort.

“We will not be giving them portable currency, but territory and privileges. The more we give them, the greater a shame it will be to abandon them. That is human nature. I also believe that they will work together with us to defeat Zorzar-sama in order to turn these promises into a reality.”

Though she risked admonition for her words, the Emperor nodded heavily.

“I see.”

It would seem that he was in a good mood.

“However, Nihon is a threat to the Empire. If they do as you say, the threat will forever remain by our side. What do you think?”

“It is not a problem, is it? Your Majesty does not intend to restart the war, I trust?”

“Indeed, that is so.”

“We should not make enemies of the Nihonjin, but use their strength. The leadership of the Empire will be difficult due to the past relationship between its vassal nations and the demihuman tribes. However, if we get along with Nihon, they will surely become reliable allies. Though it may displease you to hear it, I urge you to do this, at least until the Empire can soar once more.”

“Indeed, it is true... Being able to think of that much at your age is quite amazing.”

Following the Emperor’s lead, Count Marx added his praise:

“Your political instincts are quite astute, given your youth. I look forward to your future.”

“However, your bias toward Nihon is far too obvious. You should focus more on the Empire’s gain before speaking. I understand that you say so because you despise Zorzel, but to those who do not understand, they might think you do not have the Empire’s best interests at heart.”

Sherry broke into a cold sweat as she heard the Emperor’s criticism.

“I shall be more aware of that.”

“Still, there is logic to your words. Coveting everything will leave you with nothing. Thus, it is better to limit what one desires, and thus attain it successfully.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Hm. It would seem appointing you as an emissary for these talks would be most interesting.”

“Your, Your Majesty. Might that be unwise?”

It would seem even Count Marx was compelled to oppose the Emperor’s suggestion. Sherry felt that he had a point, but these talks were not that simple.

Sherry too was quite panicked by how her gamble had not only paid off, but had given her more than she could handle.

“I, I, I shall soon wed the Nihonjin diplomat.”

“In other words, you are still a member of Imperial nobility. Then, is it not settled? It would be quite amusing to have an innocent, lovable child like you mixed in with these irritable politicians.

“Ah, but, I fear I may be unable to successfully handle matters of negotiation.”

“Umu. Of course. Thus, the actual work will be given to the senior members of the delegation, while you may serve as the representative of the emissaries. You may well be what cools down the Nihonjin diplomatic detachment. After all, making harsh demands of a child looks bad to everyone. Count Marx, I know this is an imposition, but nevertheless I order you to give her a suitable title.”

Even if the Emperor himself had spoken these words, Count Marx was opposed to them, and he hesitated in answering. Still, the Emperor had said as much, he had to respond carefully:

“Then, let us first acknowledge Sherry-san as the heir to House Tuery and recognize her as a Viscountess of the Imperial peerage. I doubt anyone will treat her lightly if she is the head of a noble house. Then, we shall elevate her to the rank of Countess. Thus, Sherry-san will be worthy of serving as an envoy personally appointed by Your Majesty.

The Emperor looked to Sherry.

“You have lost your estate and family. Thus, you lack even a dowry to be wed. That is certainly a cause for despair. At the very least, I pray you will wear this honor with pride.”

“Ha... I am deeply grateful for your generosity.”

She might have gained a title to substitute for a dowry, but she did not think it would please Sugawara. Still, Sherry respectfully lowered her head and decided to accept it.

This was because serving as the Emperor's envoy would be troublesome, but she had already sensed that it was ideal for steering the situation in the direction she desired. If she messed up, it would not reflect badly on her, and she would not be shamed. Thus she accepted the Emperor's orders with grace.

CHAPTER 7

This was the JSDF Central Hospital. Itami was warded in the Contagious Diseases block.

Given the pathogens it was designed to handle, all the windows in the building were sealed shut. The interior was kept at a lower air pressure than the outside so airborne bacteria and viruses would not flow to the outside.

Entry in and out of it was heavily regulated. Itami in particular was practically imprisoned, followed and observed by powerful-looking security troopers around the clock.

Why did these men carry Ithaca shotguns and other non-standard issue weapons? Why were NBC suits and man-portable flamethrowers permitted within a hospital? Anyone would wonder out loud about those things. In contrast, Itami spent his days lying lazily on his bed, his face buried in some manga or light novel which had been obtained through an online shopping service named after a certain South American rainforest.

“So, why are you wasting your time here~?”

Rory sat on a round cushion stool, looking at the big guy beside her.

His uniform had a black badge with “MP” stitched on it. He stood in the corner, unmoving and silent, like some kind of decoration.

“Ahh, well, the truth is I decided to pass the time with a joke...”

While walking along the hallway, Itami decided to see what would happen if he suddenly doubled over, clutched his belly and rolled around while screaming, “Ah, dammit, it’s coming out! Fuck! Gwaaaargh!” and before he knew it, he was already doing it. Naturally, it caused a big ruckus and everyone got mad at him. Very mad, in fact. Thus, he was currently repenting his sins here. Except, he did not feel repentant at all. The reason was because he was overjoyed.

As one might expect, that prank had lasting consequences. The hospital had passed their judgement on Itami. The nurses gave him the stink-eye, and the doctors constantly subjected him to painful examinations with nothing remotely resembling patient care.

This was an age where “Try Again” and “A Society Where One Can Start Afresh” were trumpeted as big things, but Itami had personally experienced the fact that there were some things from which one could not recover.

More specifically, Itami’s prank highlighted the fact that a conventional security posture could not deal with emergencies of this nature.

The people around him had panicked and could not respond effectively. Once they knew it was just a prank, they were angry of course. But at the same time, they were greatly relieved. The people in charge had watched many sci-fi movies featuring alien parasites, and they demanded increased security.

This was the result.

The security troopers escorting Itami were fully outfitted in bullet and knife-proof body armor, carrying shotguns loaded with buckshot, and they paid attention to even the smallest abnormalities. Itami was never left unattended during his two weeks in this place. They waited for him in front of the door even when he went to the bathroom or showered.

“Objective has reached toilet!”

He could not remain still once he heard the voice from outside.

They gave a report any time he spent more than 5 minutes in the same place. In addition, the security troopers refused to respond to him no matter how he tried to chat them up. It was clear that they did not intend to open up to someone they might have to execute if the situation went bad.

“H~m... so why not treat him as an ornament~?”

“I think that would be too much.”

“But can he really stay like that without moving a muscle~”

“I’ve tried ways and means, but none of them worked.”

Itami told Rory that he had told jokes and danced in front of him. It would seem he had been very free.

“H~m~”

An evil gleam filled Rory’s eyes as she looked over the security trooper. Then she suddenly drew close to Itami and kissed him.

“Ah...”

Even the security trooper’s expression changed, to one of surprise.

“Mmm...”

Rory smiled to herself, as if to say, *he gave in*.

Itami touched his lips as well, replaying what had just happened to him. However, Rory continued holding on to him, pressing her body against his, and her breathing grew rapid and ragged as she guided him towards the bed.

“I say, how long are you going to be here? It’s been so looooong, I can’t take it any more...”

Her sweet voice and hot breath washed over Itami’s ear.

The security trooper looked at Itami like he was a criminal. Well, that was only to be expected; Rory might be over 900 years old, but from the outside she looked like she was 12 or 13. Sexual contact with a girl of that age, even if it was consensual, was still a form of statutory rape. Said rape was currently in progress, so even the JSDF MP could not help but react to this.

“What, what do you mean by ‘so looooong’, I don’t get it. We don’t have this sort of lewd relationship, right?”

“Why are you trying to hide it? Haven’t we come all this way already?”

Itami glanced at the security trooper every now and then.

The man's face was flushing red, and he was clearly uncomfortable as he tried to fix his eyes elsewhere. Judging by the way he was gulping, he was trying to think of something else. His conscience and duty were probably warring within him.

“Ah, no, you see, there's someone else here, Rory-san...”

“It's not as though he's looking this way...”

Rory mounted Itami, eyeing him like a carnivore sizing up its soon-to-be prey.

“But, but he can hear us...”

“So let him listen, it's not like it's a bad thing. All this time, Lelei and Yao and Tuka have always been by your side, so I can't cut loose and have fun. Now that it's just the two of us, it should be okay, right~?”

“Like I was saying, it's not just the two of us...”

“There's nobody else here~”



“No, there is.”

“Just the two of us~”

With that excuse which barely even counted as such, Rory leaned in and licked Itami’s neck.

The security trooper finally made his move. Unable to stay still any longer, he dashed out into the corridor, trailed by the sound of footsteps.

“Yay, we win!”

Itami and Rory exchanged a high-five of “Victory!”

After savoring the peace and calm the two of them shared, they realised exactly what kind of situation they were in.

Rory was mounted on Itami’s thigh, facing him with her arms around his neck. Since there was a blanket between the two of them it was not too bad, but psychologically speaking, they could not possibly be closer.

Rory blushed and lowered her face in embarrassment.

“Ah, well... see, maybe it’s time you... got off?”

“Your arm~”

“What?”

“If you don’t move your arm... I can’t get off.”

At some point, he had put an arm around Rory’s back. Itami immediately let go and raised his hands, as though in surrender.

After that, Rory pressed her lips to Itami’s. Unlike the gentle fluttering of earlier, this was a savage, hungry kiss.

However, just as Itami was about to put his arm around Rory again, she broke away and got off the bed.

She smoothed out her bunched-up skirt and rearranged her messed-up clothing and hair. Then, she acted as though nothing had happened. If someone asked her about it, her reply would be "I have no idea."

This was one of Rory's tricks. Even though he knew it, Itami was still hard-pressed to hide the pangs of longing regret within him.

"Alright... this is what you asked for~"

Rory nonchalantly dumped a bag on Itami's knee.

...Ggk.

Unwilling to admit defeat, Itami pretended as though nothing had happened and glanced at the package on his knee.

"Thank you, that was a great help. Did you successfully cut it in two?"

"They're not exact halves. I just split it."

"That's fine. Thanks."

Saying so, Itami peeled off the sticker from the delivery service and pasted it on the bag.

"What are you going to do with this diamond?"

"I have no idea what's going to happen to it, so I wanted to send it to my mom's guardian. After all, I'm being used as political capital and might be given to *somebody* at any time, right?"

Itami was trying to make a dig at her, but Rory neatly ignored it.

"What's a guardian?"

"It's someone who manages finances for people whose judgement is impaired. He handles the hospital fees and other expenses."

“Hmm... that's pretty handy.”

“With people like him around, my mom can live without difficulty and worries, right?”

“Looks like you'll need to make more change, then,” Rory replied. “Speaking of which, how long are you going to stay here?”

“Personally speaking, I don't mind staying here forever. After all, I might be infected with some sort of unknown pathogen or parasite, right? It's my duty as a JSDF trooper to minimize that sort of risk to the nation, right? Hahaha...”

“You say that, but it looks like you're just slacking off here.”

Rory looked around as she said that. The area around Itami's bed was littered with mountains of doujins, manga, light novels. There were some PET bottles and snacks too. It would seem he was having it pretty good here.

“Still, even if they ask me to work hard here, there's nothing I can do.”

Indeed, all Itami could do here was submit to a battery of tests.

They ran erythrocyte counts, biochemical assays, CT, X-Ray and PET scans on him, took cell samples and cultured them, and after the full course of those examinations, all they could do was observe him every day. Since he was still being paid for this, Itami was beside himself in joy.

Rory sighed at Itami's state, and rubbed her left arm.

One of the nurses had drawn a blood sample from Itami's arm with a thick needle. The process made Rory wince as she saw it, as though she were the one in pain. Perhaps that sensation still lingered.

“Speaking of which, what are you guys up to? What's everyone doing?”

“Mm. Lelei's conducting magical experiments. Tuka and Yao returned to Arnus and they're explaining the situation to the ALC.”

“How about Pina and Hamilton?”

"They've been having fun everywhere. I think they've been visiting Lisaa every day now."

...Lisaa? Ah, it must be Risa, Itami thought. The lightbulb above his head flickered two or three times like a fluorescent lamp before springing to life.

"Does she really not want to be involved in politics anymore?"

"She said something about art being enough for her."

"Ah yes, about that, how's the handling of the Gate going? Has everyone agreed on shutting it down yet?"

Rory sighed dejectedly at Itami's question.

"Frankly speaking, keeping Lelei's situation a secret is very difficult. The Japanese won't give us a concrete answer. There's only one way to close the Gate, but they haven't quite resolved themselves yet."

"Ahh, that's politics for you. Even if it's an open and shut case, they can't rush into it. Life would be much easier if we could make choices so easily."

It was true that the Gate-opening experiment was a success, but it was no guarantee of the permanent link between worlds. This was the first time humanity had tried to manipulate the unknown phenomenon which was the Gate. It was only natural for people to be wary of things they were not sure about.

"Still, we can't just leave it be. We have to convince them to close the Gate."

Rory frowned at Itami's phrasing, which sounded as though he was talking about somebody else.

This man always seemed to think that things like these did not concern him.

Loneliness filled Rory, as though she had been abandoned. Granted, it was their fault that they had used Itami as leverage without discussing the matter with him, but was it too much to have him understand their reasons for doing so? They knew well that this was infatuation on their parts, but even so, that was a girl's heart for you.

This loneliness only grew stronger because Itami was only worrying about Lelei, who was responsible for the opening, closing and management of the Gate.

“Personally speaking, I don’t like the idea of Lelei becoming a device to open and close the Gate.”

As Rory agonized over whether to speak, she puffed up her cheeks, and Itami proceeded to lightly poke them as she went “Hmmph~”. Eventually, she decided to explain herself to him.

“Well, I guess there’s no need to worry about that.”

“Why do you say that? Isn’t Lelei going to be tied down for the rest of her life?”

Itami felt that in Lelei’s case, a life of being responsible for connecting Japan to the Special Region was not worth living.

“I’ve discussed the matter with Lelei. In the end, we came to the conclusion that, ‘we’ll think of something~’

“Really?”

Rory nodded slightly.

“We plan to talk to Belnago Shrine and have them take over the responsibility for opening and closing the Gate.”

“How are you going to sell the idea to them? Hardy’s relic can’t be used by anyone other than Lelei, right?”

“The power of the Gate falls under Hardy’s jurisdiction, Because of that, anyone with that power will become a vassal of the Queen of the Underworld. But Lelei is an outsider who is not connected to Hardy. To the priestesses of Belnago Shrine, this is highly irregular.”

“Mmm.”

“Bringing Lelei to their side would be the best way to correct that irregularity, am I wrong?”

“But Lelei hates Hardy. Could it be that they’re going to force...”

After being possessed by Hardy, Lelei was still trying to lose the weight she had put on. There was no way she would bear any goodwill for Hardy.

“As if I would allow them to use force. It’s because of that point that we can make a deal. We allow them to manage the opening and closing of the Gate, and in exchange, we will give Belnago Shrine the relic and the right to use it...”

Itami clapped his hands in understanding.

“I see... but can you even transfer the rights to use it?”

“This way, Lelei will be freed from having to administer the Gate.”

Rory sighed.

“And then, Hardy’s shrine will be able to proselytize as the price of their passage.”

Giselle had followed them from Kunapnui to Arnus, where she was currently roaming around town, so all the Shrine had to do was give her orders to that effect, Rory said,

“Well, on the other hand, it just means that if we can put up with that, we won’t have to worry about Lelei being bound by the Gate.”

“Is that so. But will she have her movements restricted or something?”

Rory smiled and nodded.

“Still, if that’s the case, couldn’t we have had the Belnago Shrine run the Gate instead? According to what you said, anyone could use Hardy’s relic, not just Lelei, right?”

Rory commented that he was making too light of the situation.

“That won’t work. What I’ve said since just now will only happen after Lelei begins managing the Gate. After all, that sort of thing isn’t Hardy’s true intention; she would never help us like that from the start~”

“...Isn’t it strange, though?”

“The priestesses are quite proud of themselves. They dislike being ordered around by others, and they do worship that Hardy.”

That Hardy... Itami could not approve of those words.

“I see. But doesn’t that mean the Gate will be fine? All we have to do next is convince everyone.”

However, Rory put on a vulnerable, worried expression and threw herself on the blanket on Itami’s knee.

“That’s going to be haaaard~”

“Why is that?”

Rory sighed again, and looked lazily at Itami.

“We’ve been running around like mad to protect our darling Youji, but we aren’t very persuasive when it comes to making them give up their livelihoods. The ALC trades with the JSDF and sells high to the merchants of the Special Region. In other words, everyone makes a living with the Gate. If we take the Gate away, we take away their livelihoods.”

“How do people who live without troubles and who already have their most precious thing squared away work up the audacity to tell others to “give up your way of life?”

Rory sighed.

“Then just cancel the demand for me.”

“I don’t want to!”

Rory did not say it was impossible, but that she was unwilling, and thus she revealed her feelings.

“Why is that? How could that be?”

“It’s nothing,” Rory said in a tone of what appeared to be anger.

“You blockhead! You dummy!”

She smacked Itami.

“Tell me, what’s so good about me?”

“There’s no rhyme or reason behind liking someone. Feelings which exist for a reason vanish when that reason does... Strength? Attractiveness? Might is ultimately a momentary thing, while looks fade with age. Even a super-intelligent man will lose the keenness of his intellect as he grows older. Liking anyone for those reasons implies that it will be a short-lived infatuation.”

“Still, I don’t think I deserve to be with a woman like you.”

Rory smiled brightly, and brought her face closer to Itami’s as she whispered:

“When we were young, we could declare our love freely and openly, because we did not need to worry about many things. But as we grow older, that particular trait vanishes. The important thing is what you feel when you glimpse a person’s soul, but people have gradually come to forget its importance. I say, put your faith in that miracle.”

“Miracle?”

Rory pointed to Itami’s chest. “Correct.”

“I’ve been searching the world over for a soul like yours. I’ve waited too long, far too long for something like it,” she said.

Itami could not help but get embarrassed. He could not even come up with a witty retort.

“I’m glad to hear that, but I can’t give you an answer right now. It may be that I cannot separate myself from Tuka, Lelei or Yao. Like now.”

“Someone aiming to be a goddess of love would be unworthy of that position if she demanded that of her partner. That is our problem, so please, don’t worry about it.”

The church of Rory taught: One had to keep one's beloved by their side, never letting them go, never letting the chance slip away. One had to fight for them and win them. Rory had even exhorted Lelei, Tuka and Yao to live by these words in their daily life.

"There's a song in the story Galaxy Express 999, where one of the lyrics says "parting is a form of love too" or something along those lines."

Rory raised her face and glared angrily at Itami.

"Life is not a play. Praying for the other person to be happy? How stupid is that? The story doesn't end after the curtain falls. No, in fact, that's when life begins!"

Having said that much, Rory lay down on Itami's knees again and cupped her head.

"How can I criticize people for being greedy when I'm spouting sappy romantic lines like these..."

It would seem the topic had returned to persuading the members of the ALC.

Be they the Japanese or members of the ALC, everyone knew the importance of closing the Gate. However, they did not understand the vulnerability of having the Gate, so they were not on their guard. Thus, they chose to maintain their present lifestyles. It was a natural decision.

"So because of that, we have to open the Gate again?"

It was for that reason that Lelei had come to Japan to conduct research. By increasing the reliability of Gate-opening techniques, she could dispel their unease.

"We might be able to convince the Japanese government like this, but it won't work on the ALC's members. We're hinting at it in a roundabout way, but we can't actually say anything which they can get behind."

"...Yeah."

Once people learned about Lelei, she would become a target. If that were the case, even hinting about her would be out of the question. Still, if they did not even do that much, they would not be able to begin making progress on convincing them.

In other words, there was no way out.

“Tell me... what should I do?”

This was a rarely-seen side of Rory — her vulnerable side. Itami patted the hair of the girl on his lap and encouraged her:

“It’s fine. There’ll be a way.”

“I hope you can convince everyone of that.”

“Me? Don’t, ow!”

Itami’s patting hand had slid down and tweaked Rory’s nose before she bit his fingers.

Rory slowly sat back up, looking at the man who refused to return her advances with an expression of vague disgust. “Hmmph~” she smirked.

“How can we chase them out~?”

“What? Chase who? Where to?”

As Rory saw this, coming as it was from Itami, the eternal runner, Rory pouted and said, “As I thought” before telling him in an exaggerated manner:

“The legitimate Imperial government approves of the closure of the Gate, but they hope it can wait until after dealing with Zorral. But where did they learn this from?”

If Tuka had told the ALC members about the situation, then it would have spread from there. Even so, the news had spread too fast. However, it was an open secret that House Formal of Italica had sent spies to Arnus, so Itami felt that it had probably leaked through them instead.

Even Itami felt the matter had to be handled carefully.

“So they’re telling us to deal with that Zorral... huh. Has news about Lelei gotten out as well?”

Once people had their eyes on Lelei, she would be forced to flee constantly. Even Itami had picked up on that.

As she saw the look on his face, Rory smiled darkly, as if to say, “great!” and proceeded to fan the flames further.

“For the time being, I’ll watch over Lelei. Still, word is going to get out~”

After the experiment at Tsuchiura, Lelei had remained in Japan. This was because she was cooperating with Japan to research magic and the Gate. Realizing her importance, the Japanese had increased their guard over her, but given Japan’s current anti-espionage stance, that would only invite scrutiny from other nations. Because of that, Japan was unsure whether to strengthen or soften their stance. Komakado must surely be agonizing about this.

“According to Lelei, she wants you to protect her, Youji~”

“The problem is Arnus. I understand, I’ll try to go back as soon as I can so until then...”

He grabbed Rory’s hands.

“I’m counting on you. The fact is, I’m feeling very uneasy about all this. It makes me want to escape from here right away. Something tells me that if I don’t, terrible things will happen. Ah, look, the goosebumps are rising up on me...”

Rory stared at Itami, and Itami stared at Rory. They looked into each other’s eyes, holding hands.

And then, at that moment, the ward door crashed open. A line of stout security troopers were lined up outside.

“Wha-what?!”

“First Lieutenant Itami Youji! You are under suspicion of sexual misconduct involving a minor! Confess!”

“What?! I didn’t do nothing!”

“Aren’t you at it right now?!”

Dozens of fingers pointed at Itami and Rory's hands.

"These hands are the proof of your guilt!" the troopers shouted as one.

"Ro-Rory's not a minor!" Itami shouted. Incidentally, the Child Welfare Act designated anyone under 18 as a minor.

"That's right, I'm not a child~" Rory replied.

"It's okay now. Were you afraid?"

However, a female police officer protectively embraced Rory and carried her out of the ward in an instant. That was a movement which would have earned top marks when it came to protecting an abused child. In addition, she had done so purely out of kindness, so Rory was reluctant about forcefully resisting her.

"Do, do you guys not watch the news!"

The incident where Rory had come before the Diet and revealed her true age as being over 900 had become quite famous. However, there were quite a few people in the world who cared nothing for such things. Perhaps the security troopers of the MPs harbored many such boneheaded people.

"We don't know anything about that!" they replied in unison.

"I didn't do nothing!"

After all, it was not a prank this time. The security people were all deadly serious.

Itami was dragged to another room, where he was brutally questioned.



"What did you say?"

Diabo lay on a bed that occupied more than half the room it was in. On his chest was Panache, her pure white body entwined with his, as she narrated the details of the actions taken by the official Imperial administration.

“I see. So things have already developed to that extent... how interesting.”

Diabo smiled to himself.

“His Majesty is now begging the Nihonjin to subdue Zorzar.”

“So it’s come to that. Still, that is only a natural development. Without the Jayesdeef, Zorzar would crush Italica like he would an ant. The Nihonjin aren’t happy, are they?”

“Still, the Nihonjin are starting to tire of the extended negotiations. They might be eager to conclude the proceedings and offer help.”

“Is that so... then the problem will be the terms offered... currently, the government has no funds. All they can do is promise the moon to them. Even if they retake the treasuries, there will not be much gold and silver currency to reclaim. So they must give up their land and sign an unbreakable treaty. They will surely be forced to turn over the rights to the mines.”

“It is as you say, Diabo-sama. Thus, I feel that if you make your move now, you will be able to play an important role within the official administration.”

“Are you kidding me? I’m not laughing. I’ll be Pina’s slave until the end of time if that happens. I’m not interested in that sort of thing.”

“Still, what else can you do here?”

Ever since Diabo had fled to Arnus, he had remained hidden in Panache’s room.

He could only rule over this room. This place alone was his domain.

His followers were Panache and his attendant Metmes. He could not count the cleaning maids as part of them, and more importantly, Panache was still loyal to Pina.

Diabo seemed to believe that a woman could be tamed by romantic relationships, but Panache did not consider herself such a woman. Her heart and body might have been female, but her mind and heart had been honed in a masculine fashion.

“Really now. I have a card up my sleeve.”

“What would that be?”

Diabo seemed to realize that he could not fully conquer women, so he had not laid all his cards on the table. Slowly, painstakingly, he revealed his plans, like he was a stage magican.

“First, I’ll inform Zorzar about this.”

“Is, is that really advisable?”

“Aye, just keep quiet and watch.”

Personally speaking, Panache hoped that Diabo would rein in his ambitions.

She hoped that Diabo would take his rightful place in the loyalist administration and then live a peaceful life with him. It was not simply because of the relationship they had. She believed that she and Diabo could assist Pina in her capacity as Empress and support her rule, flourishing in her government. Of course, part of that also came from the fact that she did not mind becoming Pina’s sister-in-law.

However, men’s ambitions led them to aim for the top. This made Panache uneasy.

A strategem like this which could return him to power was fiercely addictive. Panache sensed this, and she could not contain the discomfort surging forth from her heart as a result.

Could she control a man like this?

Could she return this man to reality?

The knowledge that she could not stop this man who was rushing towards destruction frustrated her, and the despair-filled woman buried her face into his chest.

“Your Highness, please reconsider. I beg you.”

The pleading which Panache loathed had finally slipped out.

“There’s no need to worry. The situation will change dramatically soon. It may be dangerous, but we will be able to ride the rising tide to a high place. I’m betting on that.”

However, if you plot your course poorly, the waves will devour you. Panache wanted to persuade Diabo with that.

Perhaps he felt sorry for the troubled look on her face, but Diabo decided to elaborate on his scheme.

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine. Zorzar will surely attempt to eliminate that magician girl. Japan will also try to stop them, but what if there is a third or fourth party? The situation will be thrown into chaos. At that point, the one who can protect the girl will control the situation.”

“Please, please don’t do this!”

Panache wanted to shout that and stop him, but the man whose eyes were clouded by the flames of ambition was smiling to himself, and not looking at her.

And so, even though she was in a physical relationship with him, the knowledge that her words could not reach his heart filled Panache with a sense of powerlessness.



At the same time, the major media outlets released online exposes about the ongoing debates concerning the unusual phenomena, taken from the outgoing House Budget Committee.

“Excuse me, Mr. Prime Minister. What countermeasures are you implementing against the problem of the Apocryph in the Special Region? Popular opinion seems opposed to closing the Gate, but there is no way to deal with the strange phenomena besides closing the Gate, am I wrong? I am compelled to state that it would be a big mistake to decide hastily without properly verifying the link between the Gate and the Apocryph. This is a prime opportunity to make contact with another world. I feel that we would lose much by letting this chance pass us by. I beg you to reconsider.”

That was the beginning of the questions from the head of the Socialist Party, Funamoto Mitama.

After being addressed by the committee leader, Prime Minister Morita rose to answer him.

“Ah~ let me explain. We do not fully understand the circumstances and mechanisms of the occurrences within the Special Region. However... ah, well, it’s not certain whether we can leave the matter be. I feel that there is a high chance these occurrences have taken place due to the existence of the Gate. Thus, it is only natural that the deliberation of any countermeasures taken must also include the possibility of closing the Gate,

The Prime Minister’s reply, read by rote off the notes below him, were naturally low-energy.

Funamoto rose once more.

“Still, we have not yet received reparations for the Ginza Incident, have we? So what exactly have we allocated so much of our budget and risked so many of our people’s lives for? Is it wise to not ask the people about their opinion before making a decision like this?”

“Our stance regarding the reparations is that we are currently at a critical moment in talks. In addition, we wish to deal with the Gate from a risk-management point of view. I hope you will wait to see the results before submitting them to the judgement of the people.”

This was ridiculous. Making the decision without consulting the people was utterly ridiculous. The opposition party councillors were agreed on this, and noises to that effect could be heard from the ranks of the incumbents as well.

After the catcalls died down, speaker Funamoto asked:

“If we close the Gate, we will not be able to interact with the Special Reason. It will incur tremendous losses both within and outside the country. How do you feel about this problem?”

Defense Minister Natsume rose to answer in PM Morita’s place.

“Regarding this topic, I feel it is necessary to consider the danger which might result if the situation is left unattended. The Gate is believed to be the source of the phenomena which are occurring in the Special Region, and now they are no longer limited to that area. Even in our country, there has been a slight increase in earthquake frequency over the past few days. Mt. Azama is showing signs of activity, and the astronomers are starting to report that the positions of stars in the sky are beginning to deviate from their usual positions. The astronomers believe that it is not the stars which are moving, but the Earth or more precisely, the space around it which is warping and thus producing a gravitational lensing effect. If that is the case, these phenomena may well develop into a disaster of worldwide proportions. At that point, we, as the controllers of the Gate, will receive stern censure.”

Funamoto would not let the matter be.

“It may be as you say. But if nothing happens, who will take responsibility for the loss of the Special Region?”

“Well, if nothing happens, would that not be good as well? The principle of risk management is to plan ahead and foresee events which might come to pass. If we do not receive a payout from an insurance policy, we do not lament that we have paid for nothing, but feel relieved that nothing happened. This is a necessary expense.”

“Which is why I am asking; haven’t we invested too much in this already? The expectations of the Special Region have grown beyond the people, no, beyond this nation, but have spread to the entire world!”

“Well, hindsight is always 20/20 when it comes to deciding whether or not we have spent too much, right? Since we cannot see the future, we cannot calculate the exact amount needed. For instance, people have recently criticized us for investing too much in countermeasures against the new influenza strains, like vaccines. But I feel that risk management needs to be excessive to be effective. While aiming for a sweet spot in preparations might appear to eliminate waste, if a sudden, acute outbreak occurs and other variables are factored in, the situation will become worse and possibly irrecoverable. Thus, I feel the term ‘exact’ implies that we will be abandoning lives which we could have saved.”

Just then, the speaking time allocated to Funamoto expired. The other councillors were rubbing their hands in anticipation. Some even shouted “Hurry and wrap this up”, among other things.

Funamoto ended by saying that “The disposition of the Gate should be a subject of national referendum” before leaving the speaker’s pulpit.

In the end, the debate in the Diet was merely a microcosm of public opinion.

Said public opinion was divided into the “Close” camp which wanted to close the Gate and the “Preserve” camp, which held that there was no proof linking the phenomena and so they should not act hastily.

The media and philosophers and scholars joined in the debate as well.

They drew up battle lines and proclaimed the worthiness of their causes, and began a war of words and advertising to secure support and agreement.

However, perhaps it was because they wanted to censure the government or because they were angry about the fact that all this had been covered up before it was exposed, but much of the media took the side of the Preserve faction. Their position was sold on the premise that closing the Gate would violate national interests and it would be a hasty decision.

Thus, the neutral faction which held no strong feelings about the matter either way began to be strongly influenced by the media.

And so, it became a situation where many voted to preserve the Gate and only a few wanted to close it.

During televised debates, there were even cases where Professor Youmei and those who opposed him shouted at each other and even came to blows.

In addition, there were many who took direct action to maintain the existence of the Gate.

These people belonged to groups who demanded that there should be an international effort to migrate through the Gate. They swarmed Ginza with signs reading “DON’T CLOSE THE GATE” and so on, while protesting in parking lots around Ginza. Some of them even planned to form a human wall around the Gate, but were dispersed by the police for obstructing traffic.

They shouted over their megaphones, “Japan has a history of being conquerors. They have caused much damage to many developing nations. Because of that, developing nations should know what to do now. Thus, Japan cannot be allowed to take unilateral action and should consider the opinions of the developing nations.”

The Chinese government released a statement along those lines.

“Japan has the right to demand reparations from the Empire for the Ginza Incident. Similarly, our country has the right to demand reparations from the Empire. This is because there were Chinese citizens in Ginza as tourists during the Ginza Incident. Our country would like to open talks with the Empire to discuss the appropriate damages. This is in the fundamental interests of the Chinese people and our government strongly opposes this course of action which infringes on our rights. If the Japanese government insists on closing the Gate and interfering with our negotiations with the Empire, then our country feels that the Japanese government should instead pay compensation in place of the Empire.”

Naturally, the Japanese reply was “Go fuck yourself.”

(TL Note: おとといきやがれ!)

To be precise, they said, “Our country has no intention of interfering in talks between China and the Empire. However, our country had no obligation to mediate for them either. If they wish to speak, they should go ahead. If they wish to declare war on the Empire, they should do so as well. However, please do so directly, without using Japan as an intermediary. The problem of the Gate is an entirely domestic matter.”

“How will you allow us to negotiate directly?” the Chinese newscasters shouted on a television broadcast.

The Japanese speaker replied, “How about shouting in their direction from Beijing? Who knows, you might be able to break the wall between worlds and reach them. At the very least, Japan will not open a path for you, nor do we have the obligation to help you either.”

As opinions went back and forth, the surprising thing was the silence of the financial world on the matter.

Many believed that they would be strongly against the closing of the Gate, but they seemed to have adopted a wait-and-see attitude instead.

This attitude was shared by the United States. Thus, there were rumors that "Japan knows how to open the Gate" circulating around Kabuto-cho. Taking the hint, the leadership of various countries around the world did not show their opposition. These rumors caused the market to fluctuate violently.

(TL Note: Where the Tokyo Stock Exchange is located)

In order to verify the truth of this rumor, the reporters pointed their mikes to the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister.

"Prime Minister! Is it true that Japan has the technology to open the Gate?"

Morita smiled, and then replied: "Well, if Japan did have that technology, it would be great. I think it would be a wonderful thing if we did."

"In other words, the rumor is false?"

"Sadly, Japan does not have that technology. It's true."

Indeed, Morita was not lying.

After all, it was Lelei who could open Gates, and not the Japanese government. If the reporters had asked, "Do you know of someone who can open the Gate?" or "Are you working with her?" then Morita -- who could not act to save his life -- would not have been able to answer. Then he would have lied and tripped himself up. However, one could only ask questions like that after learning the truth. Thus, Morita easily evaded the reporters' questions.



"Then, Mister Kanou... the news that Japan has gained the technology to open a Gate leading to the Special Region is just a lie, then?"

"Correct, President Dirrel. Calling it technology is actually somewhat problematic. It might be better described as a 'miracle', or a 'special power'. It is not something which anyone can control. All we can do is ask the person who possesses this ability to help us."

"What is all this? I hope you will go into further detail."

“There is a person who possesses the technology to open Gates in the Special Region. It was because of that our country... Ginza was attacked. Of course, the person who opened the Gate did not originally intend to let the Empire invade Japan. Whatever the case, the Empire made use of this. Our country is considering a temporary closure of the Gate in order to prevent the strange phenomena occurring around the globe from turning disastrous. It is not so much that we are going to analyze and understand the Gate and then shut it down, but more that we are going to destroy the maintenance device the Empire built to sustain the Gate.”

“Your country will, of course, introduce this person who can open the Gate to our nation, of course? We should consider elevating this special ability to a science that will serve all mankind.”

“The person who opened the Gate to Ginza seems to be called the Goddess Hardy.”

Kanou was telling the truth, but not the whole truth.

“A goddess? Please be aware that I, as the American president, will only recognize the Lord as my God.”

Incidentally, Allah in Islam and the God which the President was speaking of were actually the same entity under different names.

“Indeed. President-kakka, I believe that when you were sworn in, you placed your hand on the Bible and swore to the one true God?”

“Indeed. My country respects freedom of religion, but there is a place and time for all things to be said. That aside, I cannot find it in myself to condone the misuse of the word ‘God’.”

The power of the Christian Church in America was such that no politician could disregard it. The debate on whether Creationism should be taught in schools was the subject of much debate and even lawsuits.

“Still, will this not cause problems for your country? The fact is that the goddess Hardy resides in the Special Region. Declaring that you do not acknowledge her existence and at the same time trying to get in her good books might be difficult, to say the least.

In particular, Hardy is a goddess, and displeasing a woman will make things very difficult in all sort of ways.”

“So you want me to abandon my faith?”

“That would be your choice, Mr. President... Our country is one which is home to thousands, if not millions of gods. We visit shrines every month we call upon priests at funerals, we pledge our love to each other before a pastor at weddings, and recently even All Saint’s Day has been recognized as a religious day for pagans... no, for the open-minded. We can accept them all as gods. It doesn’t matter to us what kind of gods the Special Region has. For all we know, that might be why the Gate opened in our country.”

“Kanou, I believe you’re a Christian?”

“Yes, but I am also a Japanese citizen.”

“Hmm... then let me ask, is that goddess Hardy a person who is real and can speak, like that girl in the black gothic outfit who claims to be over 900 years old?”

“No. She seems to be an incorporeal being who requires a human as an intermediary to interact with the world. I don’t think sending your vaunted special forces to the Special Region to abduct... no, forcefully invite her would be effective.”

It took about 30 seconds before the reply came. The President bared his heart in those words.

“That was a pretty annoying incident. Forget it; it’s too risky a venture. So if we close the Gate for the time being, the Apowhatever and space distortions will calm down? That’s fine. As long as Japan doesn’t monopolize it, we can put up with it. Our country doesn’t want to be fingered as the ones who put the world in danger to make use of the Gate. We’ll wait until the Ginza Gate opens up once more.”

“I am very grateful that you understand us.”

“Ahh. I look forward to you becoming Prime Minister, Kanou.”

With that, the line to the White House hung up.

Kanou exhaled deeply, sprawling himself on his desk in exhaustion. His secretary nervously asked the Foreign Minister, “Does President Dirrel understand us?”

“As if. He must be pretending to go along before he grabs us by the short hairs. Better be on your guard.”

“Sir... the Indian Prime Minister is calling.”

“So it’s India now. Doesn’t he normally call PM Morita instead?”

“People are bothering the Prime Minister for explanation from all over, mainly the financiers.”

“...Is that so. Well, it can’t be helped... put him on.”

With that, Kanou picked up the handset with an annoyed look on his face.



The Special Region Problem Countermeasures Vice-Minister Shirayuri felt faint as she beheld the Imperial ambassador. Her jaw dropped and she was unable to speak for a time.

“What, what is His Majesty thinking?”

She knew it was rude, but she could not help asking.

Of course, she also knew it might be followed by a “How rude!” from the person she was addressing. However, the person who stood before Shirayuri in the capacity of one who possessed the Emperor’s trust replied, “I understand how you feel, because even I find it difficult to get used to my present circumstances.”

“Then, what happened, Sherry-san?”

“Well, the fact is, my inheritance of the Tuery estate has been formally recognized.”

“Congratulations are in order... I believe?”

Shirayuri knew well that Sherry could only have succeeded to the position of family head upon the deaths of her parents, so she was very careful with her choice of words.

“Of course. I am grateful for your kind words. Although my home and all my property in the Imperial Capital are lost and I lack any lands to inherit, my family is a pedigreed member of the Imperial nobility. Thus, while it is a shame to lose my estate, it is through His Majesty’s grace that I am in this present situation.”

The use of the word “situation” implied that she was not happy with her present circumstances and that things were developing poorly. Upon hearing this. Shirayuri considered that Sugawara might have taught Sherry in error. However, she had her doubts about how easily she corrected her own perceptions of her opposite number as an ambassador. It might also be Sherry’s own style of humor, for all she knew.

“In addition, His Majesty has elevated me to the rank of Countess. Apparently, it is meant to be a substitute for a dowry.”

Sherry sighed lifelessly.

“A, a dowry, you say?”

“Yes. I do not know if a noble title without any lands or holdings attached to it will delight Sugawara-sama. However, there has been a change in my place within the Imperial government, or perhaps it is just that my situation has changed, In addition, one has to consider that one has to be a Count at minimum to be considered for the position of emissary, and other reasons... Well, there were many reasons at work there which I did not fully grasp, given my youth, so I had no choice but to become the representative for the Empire during these negotiations.”

And so, many things happened.

Shirayuri said, “It must have been hard on you” and nodded between sighs. Then, she decided to look at things from a different point of view. In truth, it was she who had to conduct negotiations with a child who was having a hard time.

“I have had enough of the myriad changes in politics. I lack learning and experience in this field, so in truth I wish to hand the real work to Cicero-sama, Pulconius-sama and so on. Please bear that in mind as you treat with me, Shirayuri-dono.”

Sherry turned to face the two lines of Imperial Senators as she said this.

All of them were pro-peace members of the nobility, who were skilled in the field of diplomacy. They had all appeared at similar meetings before, so they were largely familiar faces.

“Is that so? I understand, Countess-dono, you are quite astute.”

The tips of Sherry’s ears flushed red as Shirayuri praised her.

“There is no need to flatter me so. I will be embarrassed.”

“I understand. Then, what do we have to discuss, gentlemen?” Shirayuri asked Pulconius, who was seated beside Sherry. *Even if I know, I won’t say it;* that was a basic tactic of diplomacy. In addition this would let her know who was in charge by who answered the question.

Surprisingly, it was Sherry who answered.

“It concerns the matter Sugawara-sama brought up earlier; petitioning your country to defeat the Zorral faction. Can we expect the Nihon government’s cooperation?”

“My, my country would be glad to help, but that will need to wait after a proper treaty has been ratified. How about negotiations? Can we conduct them here?”

“Yes. I have heard that the peace talks have gone on for a long time, and both sides have listed pretty much all their demands. It seems that the terms for this endeavour are all out in the open, so let us waste no time in signing the treaty.”

She’s speaking far too plainly. Shirayuri could hardly believe her ears.

“...S-Sherry-san?”

“What is it, Shirayuri-dono?”

“I believe you said just now that you were a nominal representative and the actual work of the negotiations would be handed to the gentlemen beside you...”

"Yes. As I said, I am but a humble representative in name only. That said, if I say nothing at this formal occasion, my father's departed spirit would surely chide me for playing around here. Thus, I have practiced the lines which I must speak."

Saying so, Sherry looked around her once more. Cicero had a mocking expression on his stiff face. It was plain to see how he felt about having his time to shine stolen away. However, if he brought it up he would be viewed as being immature, so he was bearing with it for now."

"...I see. Then, I take it that the contents of your speech are the product of discussion by your side and can be taken to be an official position on the matter. Am I correct in assuming that?"

"Yes, that is correct... I am currently seated here as one who has been invested with all the rights and power of the legitimate imperial government."

Sherry punctuated her statement by looking Shirayuri in the eye.

In that instant, what Shirayuri had taken to be a cute little girl had swelled up to be a towering monster in her eyes.

I must be tired, she thought as she rubbed her eyes and verified that there was, in fact, a petite little girl seated in front of her.

"If I misspeak, I am sure the gentlemen here will correct me without delay."

"Is that so. Then, let us continue."

Perhaps Shirayuri should have trusted her instincts. Perhaps she should have recalled Sugawara from Italica and had him sit in on this. After all, only Sugawara understood that the person before her might appear to be a child, but she was in fact something else entirely. Shirayuri and the others were deluded by her appearance and could not heed the alarm bells clanging within their hearts. Until the end, they could not understand why they were sweating buckets when a little girl turned her gaze on them.

And so, the talks went as the Emperor had foreseen.

Shirayuri and the skilled diplomats with her could not make harsh demands of Sherry.

"If Nihon abandons us, then Zorzal-sama will surely annihilate us. And it is not just we, but the people and many others who will be exposed to the storm that swept through the Imperial Capital. After considering that point, we can only throw ourselves upon your mercy. Thus, I pray that your country will not close the Gate."

How many people could coldly cast aside a cute girl pressing her palms together while looking at them with pleading eyes?

And so, they swiftly secured cooperation in defeating Zorzal. And then, Cicero and Pulconius added, "We should also discuss terms for a peace treaty", following on that logic to ask for more relaxed terms.

When the Japanese presented a staunch refusal, Sherry stepped up. "We had not prepared for this," she said in a deeply apologetic tone. "The legitimate government is currently penniless. We will pay, of course, but before we retake our Empire, I hope we can benefit from your leniency."

She said so with her eyes brimming with tears.

"In exchange, we will grant you the mineral rights you desire and the area around Arnus. Our side has no objections to these terms, and we hope you will accept them."

The way she said it, like it was the first time conceding to them, made the Japanese want to cry foul.

The Japanese valued consensus. With that point in mind, they were willing to make small concessions for the sake of agreement. In addition, they adopted a stance of "don't make a mountain out of a molehill" and strongly promoted an attitude of humility and largesse, calling it magnanimity. However, they were caught between a rock and a hard place during these talks, as though someone had stepped on their toes while shaking their hands. These many small concessions added up, leading to them being forced to accept very disadvantageous terms.

The Japanese demand that the Emperor apologize for his actions and take responsibility for the war was met in such a way. When Sherry said in a hesitant tone, "His Majesty Emperor Molt is a bedridden old man. I feel that he does not even have the energy to travel to Arnus, let alone Japan," they could not press him too hard.

“Instead, how would you feel about having the Crown Princess who is currently in Japan express her regret for the incident during the signing of the treaty?”

Both sides could agree on this more realistic settlement.

After that, both sides agreed that after the matter was resolved, they would arrange to have Pina crowned Empress, so as to show that she would take responsibility for the matter.

That said, the Japanese were not always on the defensive during this exchange. While their plan to add more conditions had been set back, the Japanese had already been amply rewarded. Thus, the contents of the peace treaty were quite satisfactory to them. However, the people present at the negotiations had the feeling that they had been defeated.

In any case, the girl made them all deeply uncomfortable. That sense of unease only got worse when the girl went on to say:

“I heard that the kidnapped person has safely returned. Zorزال-sama is truly a despicable man. I hope your country will soundly thrash him.”

Still, because she shrank like a student anticipating a scolding from a teacher, Shirayuri and the others could not bring themselves to resent her.



Incidentally, during this time:

Pina took advantage of her stay in Japan to spend her days drowning in “art”.

“How wonderful!”

Every page she turned drew a cry of delight from her.

She had lost herself in her delight. Much like a weeaboo who had learned Japanese to read manga and watch anime, Pina had mastered the language in order to understand doujinshi. However, her conversational Japanese was still fragmented.

“Kuh... so that’s what they do here? Manly love should be like this.”

“Oi~ Pina-san. Don’t stop~”



She had already spent two weeks in Risa's home. Risa and her friends were rushing to complete their manuscripts in time to be printed and bound for the impending doujin flea market. They were so busy that even Pina the passing-by guest had been roped into the whole mess like it was her natural place. This allowed the Imperial Crown Princess to personally experience what it was like to create what she called "art".

"This, this title, "Mercurius, Fernan X Ku", it's outrageous! It's terribly outrageous!" Pina squealed as she once more began the work of making a book.

(TL Note: けしからん)

"Shut up!" (lol)

"Be quiet!" (lol)

"Pervert!" (lol)

The playful scolding of the gathered fujoshi as they wrote blended with the snipping and clicking of scissors as they cut out pictures. After all, there was no author who would not be delighted to hear the sound of their readers being enthralled by their work.

However, Pina's mouth opened and closed, like it had been hurt. She seemed baffled by their tone, and took their words at face value.

Risa practically had her face pressed to the screen of the tablet she was holding. In this state, she translated everyone's intentions for Pina.

"So you do like it, Pina-san."

"Yes, yes."

"Why not live here?"

"That's right, that's right, let's do it."

One of the fujoshi, who was finally asleep after burning the midnight oil for three nights running, reached an arm out of the blankets like a zombie crawling from a crypt. Then, she poked her face out to express her approval. Her hair was a mess due

to her terrible sleeping posture. Perhaps it was because she had not fully awoken, but her face looked like she was still half-asleep.

Then, Pina answered:

“Nono, I was intending to extend the invitation to you all instead. Why not move to the Empire?”

“Ehh~”

“I’m glad for the invitation, but I’ll need to think about it.”

“Mm. I’d like to go to the Special Region, but staying there... didn’t they say they had to close the Gate?”

“If I can’t go back...”

Their responses echoed the sentiments of people the world over. The media constantly broadcast the need to keep the Gate open, reports about how the Gate was not the source of the various phenomena happening around the world, but there was once a show which stated the Gate to be the cause of such things, which everyone firmly believed.

And then, after prefacing her words with a “this is a secret”, Pina whispered:

“Actually, the Gate can be opened, even if it’s closed.”

“Ehhh, so that rumor’s true?”

“Then... maybe it would be okay to go.”

“It’s just that there’s almost certain to be some kind of time difference... even if they decided to open the Gate the next day on the other side, a year might have passed here. And if you’re unlucky, maybe ten years might have passed.”

“Is, is that so?”

The fujoshi ground to a halt.

“A difference of about a decade is pretty much the same as bidding farewell to your family here. Maybe it would still be easy to deal with if it were just among ourselves, but asking others to wait that long might be too much to hope for.”

“Y-yeah...”

Ten years was really that long. Murmurs of “so we can’t do it after all” filled the air around them.

“Still, on the other hand, I could look forward to enjoying a decades’ worth of your artwork. The thought of that is quite delightful.”

“That... well, that’s quite enviable.”

As this conversation was taking place, a sharp rapping rang out from the door, and then it crashed open without giving anyone time to answer.

“Is Her Highness here?!”

The person calling breathlessly to her was Hamilton. There were men in black visible behind her, most likely plainclothes police officers.

“Hamilton, you again,” Pina exclaimed in surprise. But her secretary continued in a plaintive tone:

“Please, your Highness. You have to go back.”

“I believe I have indicated my disinclination towards that. It is quite troublesome.”

“But, but you are the Crown Princess, your Highness.”

“And I do not want to return. I never accepted my position as Crown Princess in the first place.”

“But His Majesty designated you...”

“Ahhhhh, shut up! I’m busy now! Look, everyone’s stopped because of you. Tell Italica not to bother about me anymore and figure something out themselves!”

“Your, your Highness...”

It might have been a plea from her long-suffering adjutant Hamilton, but Pina's attitude remained cold and aloof.

“I no longer wish to involve myself with politics. Only bad things have happened every time I have done so, be it for me or the Empire.”

“But, you're here, as the Crown Princess, and if you don't show up to the signing of the peace treaty, the Nihonjin might take it as an insult...”

“Nobody ever informed me about that.”

And then, a voice came from behind Hamilton: “Please allow me to pass, Hamilton-sama. I will speak directly to Pina-sama.”

Hamilton replied in the affirmative, and stepped out of the narrow threshold to the cramped apartment, clearing a path for the owner of that voice.

“Oya, and you would be...?”

Pina frowned at the sight of the girl-child who had showed herself. She was apparently the heiress of the Tuery family. What was she doing in Japan?”

“Your Highness, we have been long parted. This one is called Sherry.”

“Indeed, it has been a while. But why are you here? If you wish to join the knight bands, you need only speak to Bozes at Italica.”

“It is not my intention to enlist in the knight bands.”

“Then what do you want of me?”

“I am here today to beseech your Highness to return to her station.”

“And why must a child do such a thing?”

“This is because the terms we have negotiated may not be finalized due to your Highness' selfishness.”

“You speak as though everything were already decided.”

“Your Highness, that is precisely the case.”

Hamilton interrupted from the side.

“What did you say?”

“Sherry-san no, Countess Sherry has already settled matters with the Japanese.”

“Is that so...”

Pina laughed coldly.

“Well, it seems Father has finally decided to discard his pride. Any negotiations can be concluded if you but give ground. And then, he'll pin it all on a little girl and make excuses. That must be it. How shameless of him!”

However, Sherry chuckled heartily.

“His Majesty appointed me as his emissary because most of the difficult negotiations were concluded. Of course, I cannot guarantee that His Majesty was not thinking along the lines of what your Highness implies, but I believe that is not the case.”

“And what would you know, given that you are the living personification of a child in curls?”

“I may be a child, but I am also the official emissary of His Majesty. If talks with the Nihonjin were potentially beneficial, he would not pay them no heed. Thus, I did my best in the process.”

Hamilton added, “Your Highness. The fact is that the terms secured for the Empire were quite favorable. We are now at the practical stage of discussing how to eradicate his Highness Zorzar by military means.”

“Ah, so you're saying that we will fight shoulder to shoulder with Nihon against Onii-sama?”

Given the state of Italica, their current situation qualified as exactly that.

That situation came into being thanks to the existence of House Formal. However, that was also as far as it could go. Since Japan and the Empire were officially at war, fighting together was out of the question. In addition, the idea of both side deploying their forces to fight Zorral was essentially turning yesterday's enemy into today's friend, and Pina could not imagine that.

“We came to discuss peace for that reason.”

After hearing Sherry's words, Pina could not conceal her surprise.

“How surprising... if Japan fights in earnest, Onii-sama will not last a second.”

The hellish scenes of carnage which she had witnessed while fighting bandits at the Battle of Italica replayed themselves before Pina's eyes. They might be aligned with Zorral, but they were all still Imperial troopers. They would be subjected to an utter massacre. It would be a one-sided slaughter, with no room to retaliate, without any hope or mercy.

Pina's chest ached, the way her stomach did when it cramped up. It was a familiar sensation; one she had experienced many times when she worried about the Empire's future.

“What do you think, Princess Pina? Can you return?”

Hamilton seemed to be peeking at her expression as she said that.

However, Pina replied: “No, I've decided not to get involved with this sort of thing anymore,” and then she turned her face from them.

Hamilton shouted: “Why?! Isn't this the chance for you to take the Empire into your hands, your Highness?”

And then, Pina glared at her secretary.

“I don't want the Empire!”

“What, what are you saying, at this point?”

“I’m saying, Hamilton, that ever since the war started, I do not believe anyone has run around and racked their brains about the Empire’s future the way I have. Am I wrong about that?”

“No. Your Highness has probably worked the hardest here among all of us.”

“See? I struggled so hard for the Empire. I suffered and agonized to defend the Empire. I ran back and forth and strove to open fronts and avenues for negotiation. I bore all the shame and insults heaped upon me. And then all my efforts were denied. I was strung up as a scapegoat and all their frustrations were heaped upon me! I’ve had it. I say, rather than harboring high-sounding ideals about saving the nation and the people, why not pretend to be an airheaded political tool to be married off to some royal family in the boondocks? Wouldn’t that be better?!”

“Your, your Highness...”

“I say, Hamilton. You were the only one who protected me then. Did you not find it painful? Did you not find it sad?”

“At that time, all I thought of was defending you, your Highness.”

“At that time, all I thought of was protecting the Empire, and so I strove with all my effort. But then, the Empire said that it no longer needed me? Can you understand how I felt back then? You endured the slings and jibes of many to protect me back then; can you imagine how it would feel if your charge turned around and berated you? It felt like I was being stabbed in the back.”

“Not everyone in the Senate felt that way. It was only the pro-war faction which said so. The pro-peace faction would never think that they did not need you.”

“Then how about the other half? Even if they disagreed with my political views, they should have at least recognized my efforts and feelings.”

Even political enemies should acknowledge their rivals’ sacrifice and effort, Pina said. Perhaps this was an expression of her political ideals. Since she was the sort of person who had come up with the idea of her knight band after watching a play, it was only natural that she might think that way. Still, this idealism only deepened the shock and despair she felt at being betrayed.

Pina messed up her beautiful red hair and clutched her forehead like she was cradling it.

“I was abandoned by everyone. How do you think I felt when Diabo-niisama cast me aside and when I looked at Bozes flying off into the sky? Who saved me from that hellish palace? In the end, the only one who reached a hand out to me was Itami-dono, was it not?”

“Your Highness. At that time, it was all everyone could do to save themselves.”

“And you expect me to accept that? And you expect me to take the lead in committing fratricide? I’m done! I’m finished! Hamilton, don’t you think I’ve been fighting too long? While I was struggling, wasn’t everyone taking it easy? Then what’s wrong with me idling this time round?”

And Hamilton had nothing to say.

After all, nothing could sap the will to fight more than being censured and rejected by the very people one was striving to protect.

The answer to the question “What am I fighting for?” was the only thing which allowed a warrior to overcome the pain and suffering they felt every day. Was it for someone else? Was it for themselves? Even a childish dream or mundane desire would suffice. One needed something to prop themselves up.

However, the blame and shame from behind shook that pillar of support, and robbed them of their will to fight.

I was betrayed. I have no obligation to fight on after being covered in wounds. I have fully discharged my duties as a member of the Imperial household. So I will now take my leisure. What is wrong with that?

Pina could understand the thrust of Pina’s argument. It was a very compelling one. Being that she understood her, Hamilton could not bring herself to persuade Pina to take the field once more.

However, Hamilton was not the only one here.

The petite girl stepped forward.

"I pray your Highness will not speak as though you were the only one who went through hardship."

As she heard what was apparently the starting bell of a calamity-comparing contest, Pina shot back with a "Say what?" She had anticipated someone would use the old chestnut of, "there's people worse off than you" and she had mentally prepared herself to systematically shoot down every single point which was raised.

However, the girl's words did not go in the direction Pina had predicted.

"I do not wish to draw a comparison to the pain your Highness has suffered, but I hope you will understand that at the time, everyone was being targeted and many people died."

Pina felt like she had raised a spear, only to have it snatched away. She went, "And so?" while showing that she wanted to hear what Sherry had to say.

She did not realize this was what Sherry was aiming for.

Battle was a means of convincing others of the righteousness of one's cause.

Of course, there was a difference between explaining with words and resorting immediately to violence to force an understanding, but at heart, once one was convinced of the other side's validity, they would concede.

The Japanese lost the Pacific theatre of World War 2. Thus, they had the mindset of the victors forced upon them, and they were made to acknowledge the righteousness of their cause. Their own ideals were branded as "imperialism" and "invasion of others", painted in the blackest shades and rejected. Of course, imperialism and the invasion of others were still regarded as vile by today's standards, but everything they touched was similarly stained in sinful colours.

The secret of persuasion was to make the other party listen to you. However moving one's words were, they counted for nothing if they were not heard.

Pina was the founder of the knight bands, and to some extent she was a professional warrior. However, she was not adept at the dance of words. Or rather, it was because

she was a professional combatant that she disdained the art of verbal persuasion. While the combat curriculum she had studied was essentially diplomacy and governance in a different form, she did not understand that ultimately, the purpose of politics and diplomacy was to convince the other party through the medium of negotiation.

Therefore, in this battle of words, Pina had started in an unfavorable position.

“Did you know? Bozes-sama charged into the Imperial Capital by herself to rescue you, Pina-sama.”

The work of persuading Pina would have to start from nullifying the source of her stubbornness.

This was the reason behind picking a topic which could not fail to make Pina change her mind.

Pina replied, “What, is that true?”

She looked at Hamilton, and her adjutant nodded silently.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Bozes isn’t the sort of woman who would excuse herself of defeat by saying she tried her best. The fact is, being unable to save your Highness was equivalent to abandoning you, in her eyes. Thus, she was deeply ashamed and could not bring herself to face you...”

Pina sighed deeply.

“Is that so. Back then, Bozes... so that was how it was.”

Pina had not met Bozes and the others after that.

She could not bear to stay in Italica, and had withdrawn from the temporary Imperial Palace.

By the time Bozes and Beefeater had recovered from their wounds and returned, Pina was no longer in Italica.

“My parents are both no longer in this world. All this is the fault of your Highness’ brother.”

“My... oh?”

Zorral was Pina’s elder brother. That said, she was hoping that Sherry would not emphasise that fact. This was because saying so falsely implied that Pina was at least partially responsible for Zorral’s sins. However, Sherry’s direction was not clear. She wanted to emphasise the fact that Zorral was Pina’s brother to induce a sense of responsibility within her, and thus motivate her to take part in the treaty ratification.

Pina put on a front. *This is just the shallow thinking of a child. How could I fall for it?*

“Let me get this straight; I have severed ties between Ani-ue and myself.”

And then, Sherry laughed.

“Really now? What a relief.”

Her relieved expression was once again counter to expectations, throwing Pina’s mind into chaos.

“W-Why is that?”

“I swore an oath to exact revenge upon Zorral-sama. Ever since I have been praying for his demise.”

Pina could not say anything in the face of Sherry’s blunt and direct statement.

Any Imperial noble would have their doubts about saying such things. The pro-peace faction wanted to support Pina’s cause, but from another point of view, it was because they wanted to make her responsible for the murder of a member of the Imperial family.

“Well, you said that you had severed your ties to Zorral-sama, so that’s fine right, Pina-denka?”

Sherry's lips had curved up into a crescent moon, and one could practically hear her going "fufufu" or perhaps "kekeke". It was a spine-chilling smile.

Pina could not help but lean back.

"But... but how will you avenge yourself on Ani-ue?"

"Well, the strong must be dealt with by those who are stronger."

"Which is the reason for this peace treaty, right?"

"Yes. I intend to borrow Japan's power. This is what we discussed."

"But, but if that happens..."

"Pina-sama. The ladies of the knight band suffered great losses while battling the oprichniki. They fought, bled and died to defend me, who fled into the Emerald Palace. And Zorzial-sama went on to denounce their actions as treason. If Zorzial-sama continues winning, the people who gave their lives to obey your command will be branded as traitors to the Empire. Pina-sama, can you remain unmoved after seeing the names of your knights and your soldiers trampled into the dust like that?"

"No... how could I not be moved?"

Pina bit her lip in agony.

"Because of him, we could not conduct proper peace negotiations and the war continues. That man has stained the honor of the Empire by involving the innocent in war. Can you really ignore that, your Highness?"

"How could I?!"

"Then, where will you go from here?"

"I... I will not take sides. Ani-ue... is still my older brother!"

"Did you not say you had broken your bonds with Zorzial-sama?"

"Which means you intend to have us kill each other, then?"

Ultimately, Pina was hesitating over having to fight her brother.

Looking back on history, power struggles between brothers for the throne were hardly an uncommon sight, but Pina did not think it was proper. To some extent, she had the most common sense of all of them.

“I do not desire your Highness to cross blades with your esteemed brother. The Japanese gentlemen can handle that. These people are deeply offended by Zorزال-sama’s actions. However, they have been reining themselves in for political reasons. I wish to strip off the shackles of their self-restraint. In that way, they will inherit the will of we who were rescued from the Imperial Capital and destroy Zorزال-sama.”

“...S-Sherry. Who, who...”

Who are you? Pina did not dare ask that question. She was afraid that if she actually did bring it up, she would hear a terrifying answer.

“I do not wish your Highness to do much. No, in fact, I hope that your Highness will do nothing at all. When the treaty is ratified, I pray you will play the role of an air-headed political marriage piece and simply sit down. I will handle e~verything else. That much should be fine for yourself, am I right, your Highness?”

Pina could not respond. She was like a frog under the eyes of a snake, crushed by Sherry’s presence.

“Then, Pina-sama. Come, this way, please.”

Pina had no reason to reject the hand Sherry offered.

CHAPTER 8

There was a phrase called “a long-standing tradition”.

It referred to how courts and religions which ran on strict ceremony ended up developing traditions of their own. Most of these practices had emerged due to situations in the past requiring specific rulings. Over the years the reasons for these practices were forgotten, and they were retained and observed without being truly understood.

Many elements of what was regarded as common sense were accumulated over long years of experience.

For instance, driving. In Japan and the UK, people drove on the left, while in the US and other countries, people drove on the right. Why was that?

Some sources said that it was because knights and warriors wore their swords on the left. When two people passed by each other in opposite directions, their swords' sheaths would clash. Alternately, it was because swords were commonly drawn with the right hand, so they kept to the left to make it easier to face the enemy.

In any event, when proper laws had not yet been written, people followed prior examples and precedents.

The words, “They did it in the past, so we’ll do it too” had a persuasive power to them. Sometimes, that power was enough to ensnare the highest authority figures of a nation. Because of that, practices and traditions which made people wonder, “Why are we doing this?” ended up being carried on to the present day. In addition, it was commonly accepted for people to say, “You didn’t follow the exact steps of the protocol, so this treaty and agreement are null and void”.

This particular aspect applied to the Empire as well.

Signing a peace treaty was not simply a matter of placing one’s signature on a document. The minute details of protocol leading up to that moment had already been worked out far in advance. They were even more elaborate when they were the

supplicatory parties, and acting according to tradition was essentially a critical element in the treaty taking effect.

To begin with, a convoy of carriages escorted by magnificently-clad knights progressed down the main street.

By the time they reached the base of Arnus Hill, it was close to evening. They were arranged to make their entrance beneath crimson skies, heading towards the sun.

The lady knight Panache rode on a white horse. She had been assigned to guard the elegantly-decorated carriage which contained the Emperor's representative. She was a beautiful woman who was resplendent in a man's attire, radiating both gravitas and beauty, looking for all the world like a masterfully-sculpted statue.

Even women who were not into that sort of thing could not help but feel their hearts flutter as they saw her. Such was her charm as the captain of the guard.

Panache urged her horse closer to the carriage and whispered:

“Your Highness. Arnus is in sight.”

“Umu. Who will be our herald?”

“Beefeater might be a good choice.”

“Then we'll use her.”

Pina's knight band had always been more of a ceremonial detachment rather than an actual combat unit.

Nobody else could compare to them when it came to displaying an air of elegance and grace. And among them, Beefeater had been selected as their herald.

The way she rode, poised elegantly atop a white horse as she held up a flag stitched with golden threads, left everyone who saw her speechless.

In her normal life, she was unrestrained and enjoyed adopting the rough mannerisms of men. She found makeup troublesome and did not usually bother applying it. It was almost unthinkable that someone like that could carry herself like this.

She took this ceremony seriously, and the people around her could see the motivation shining brightly in her eyes.

In truth, the first choice for herald duty was Nicolaschka.

She had stayed in Arnus before, and so she was familiar with the locals and could speak Japanese. Everyone was confident that she was the ideal candidate to bear this singular honor for a knight. However, Beefeater voiced an objection.

As the preparations went on, Beefeater heard that a certain man called Kengun was going to make an appearance, and she lost her cool. She looked around uneasily, muttering incomprehensible things to herself, before finally saying, “A great task like this should be given to a leader of the band.”

“I’m not saying Nicolaschka is bad, but, ah, how shall I put it, maybe in terms of worthiness, or in other areas, she’s, ah... well, she’s not a good match for Kengun...”

Her 180-degree change in attitude surprised the people around her, but they quickly divined her hidden motives. Rumors spread through the knight band of how she had fallen in love at first sight with the JSDF commander, who did not know the language but who had told her to “wait for me”.

Even Nicolaschka, whose glorious appointment had been snatched away from her, gracefully yielded her position while saying “It looks like spring has come for Beefeater.”

“So is Beefeater worried that she won’t be good enough, or something else?”

“Right, right. All she had to do was say that she wanted to do it.”

And so, after much giggling and vocal support from the others, Beefeater was selected for the honor of being the knight band’s herald.

Beefeater had detached from the main formation by herself. When she was halted and questioned by the JGSDF security lines, she deftly held her reins and stated, “I have the honor of announcing the arrival of His Majesty’s representative. Attend swiftly to us!”

She was simply parroting these Japanese lines; Beefeater had no idea what they meant.

Of course, the JSDF had also been informed of this ahead of time, and so the welcoming party that greeted Pina and the others was matchingly immaculate.

In fact, the JSDF servicemen's questioning and her response to their interrogatives were all part of the protocol.

Their uniforms were freshly washed and ironed, and they wore red scarves to indicate that they were part of the infantry. After rigorous drilling and practice, there was no sign that they were the kind of people who usually spent their time hiding in corners. In this state, they welcomed the Imperial contingent.

Beefeater's white horse entered Arnus Town.

Before her were the people of the settlement, lined up on both sides of the road. They put down their tools and stopped their work in order to enjoy this rare sight.

The mercenaries hired by the merchants working for the ALC tidied their armor up as best as they could before forming up into ranks, in order to welcome the Emperor's representative.

The streets ran past the warehouses and the employee housing, before finally ascending the slope of Arnus Hill. That was where the Imperial Army and the Coalition Army had charged brashly and met their deaths one after the other.

Beefeater looked at the scars of the battle which lingered, and then advanced toward the hill's peak, where the entirety of the JGSDF Special Region Expeditionary Force waited in formation.



"Hmph. All they're doing is admitting they've lost. Why make such a big spectacle of it?"

The guests and waitresses had left to watch the spectacle of the arrival of a member of the royal family. Diabo sipped his wine and grumbled to himself in the quiet restaurant.

"Well, it's because that they've lost that they're putting on such a show. Don't you think it's only human nature?" Metmes, Diabo's servant, answered Diabo's musings.

"Umu. You have it at that."

The only other person left in the restaurant was the head chef, who was polishing his plates on the other side of the counter.

Perhaps he was surprised by why two men were still here despite the departure of everyone else, so he shot the occasional look of doubt towards them. Soon, he was unable to contain himself and asked:

"Dear guests, aren't you going to watch the procession?"

"It's a waste of time. How about you? Why aren't you watching?"

"I'm not happy about it. How could anyone be happy about it, anyway?"

"Then why are they watching?"

There was a wall of people in front of the restaurant.

The sound of carriages and hooves rang out; Pina's carriage was just passing by.

"Everyone's feeling uneasy. Look, they say they're going to close the Gate, right? Everyone's thinking that if the peace talks go through, then they'll talk about how to deal with the Gate next."

"Can't the Gate be opened again? That's what I heard."

"Well, that's what was heard, but how about the reality of the situation?"

"Say what? Do you suspect something?"

"Well, if they could open the Gate, why don't they say who's going to do it?"

“There must be some reason for that, right? If it’s something that can be used by someone who’s not a god, whoever has it will surely be targeted by all manner of assassins and plots. Don’t you think that’s what Zorzar of the Empire is doing?”

“Well, I understand the need for secrecy. But that also means that if that Zorzar has their eye on them, they won’t be able to do anything about the Gate if something goes wrong, am I correct?”

“...Really? That may be so.”

“Well, I don’t like that. I used to have my own place once, but when I was renovating my storefront, the landlord said something about how the guests would come here and other such pleasant things. As a result, I spent all my money on my shop, but in the end there were hardly any customers and hardly any business. I racked up huge debts and even my wife left me...”

“I see, that must have been a painful memory for you.”

“They’re saying that this is to keep the earthshaking and Apocryph and whatnot from spreading, but I don’t get their reasons at all. It’s not going to happen today or tomorrow, right? They ought to sort things out before closing the Gate. After all, the situation won’t develop as people expect.”

Coming from a man who had had to close a restaurant down in the past, the head chef’s words were oddly persuasive.

Diabo reflected on the road he had taken, and nodded as though he had realized something.

“You’re right. That’s exactly the case.”

“If anything happens to the person who can open the Gate, Arnus will be doomed. We won’t be able to make a living and we’ll be forced to roam the streets. Plus, that secret will surely get out. Even we can roughly guess who that person is.”

“Oh, do you know?”

“Well, there’s only four people in the ALC who are involved with the Belnago Shrine — Her Holiness, Tuka-san, Lelei-san and Yao. Her Holiness hates Hardy, while Yao has severed her own ties with Hardy. So it’s got to be one of the remaining two.”

“Umu, that’s a pretty good piece of deduction.”

“Most of the upper ranks of the ALC were originally refugees from Coda Village. If anything happens, they can still deal with it by returning to their village. The traders can go elsewhere, and as long as they aren’t too greedy, they should be able to continue making a living. However, for we who can only earn a livelihood because this is Arnus, we don’t have that option. What happens when the demihuman workers are out of a job?”

“Why not open another place in another town and rehire them?”

“Don’t be silly. Where would you find terms as good as these elsewhere? We can’t hope to trade like this in other places.”

“I see... so that’s why you’re against it.”

“Yeah, which is why we’re all very uneasy. It would be better if we knew what was going to happen, but it seems the disposal of the Gate is going to take place somewhere our hands won’t even be able to reach. That’s a bitter pill to swallow.”

As Diabo heard this, he reached out a hand to the head chef.

“All right, I understand. In that case, come help me.”

The head chef looked at the outstretched hand and frowned.

“Help you with what?”

“In truth, I oppose the closing of the Gate as well. Don’t worry, we won’t treat you poorly. How about that, Diabo-denka?”

Diabo looked back to his follower Metmes. Metmes, who was playing the role of Diabo, nodded severely, to convey an impression of great dignity.

“Di... Diabo-denka... as in, the Imperial Prince?”

“Correct. This is the Imperial Prince, his Highness Diabo. I am his follower Metmes. Have you heard of the disturbance in the Imperial Capital? We came here to flee that disaster. The Imperial Army doesn’t have the manpower to begin to touch this place.”

No matter how you looked at it, the so-called servant seemed haughtier than his master. However, this was how Diabo decided to introduce himself, despite their swapped circumstances.

“According to my investigations, the upper echelons of the ALC and Nihon have both been tricked. It seems linking the earthquakes and the Apocryph to the Gate was all part of Zorzar’s plan. He wants us to close the Gate ourselves, and then seize the person who holds the Gate... what was her name, Lelei?”

Metmes silently nodded.

“Zorzar plans to kidnap or kill that Lelei girl. After that, he can do as he pleases.”

“But, but... I heard that the Goddess Hardy herself explained the situation at Belnago Shrine.”

“That’s the problem. Do you think Hardy was telling the truth?”

“...So you’re saying that the gods are lying?”

“It’s not strange for a god to lie, right? Hardy opened the Gate. We don’t know why she did it. All we did was fit it with a magical device. Perhaps Hardy was angry or ashamed that something she made was tampered with by humanity, and decided to use the hands of men to close the Gate. That wouldn’t be strange, no?”

With nothing to refute that line of reasoning, the head chef nodded and replied, “Indeed.”

“Lelei-san was the one given the power to handle the Gate, am I right?”

“Correct. If you have any doubts, you should go see for yourself.”

Aren’t they trying all sorts of ways to get her to talk?

Guided by that line of reasoning, the head chef eventually nodded in agreement.

“It seems you understand that what I’m saying is correct.”

“Is that so... Well, there’s talk on the street that Lelei-san was marked by assassins... I see, so that’s what it was all about.”

“Pretty much. We’re opposed to Zorزال, so we want to deal with him. Therefore, we feel that shattering their schemes is our best course of action.”

What Diabo proposed was simple to understand, and thus the head chef could swallow it easily.

“I understand. I’ll do my best to confirm the details about Lelei-san. If it’s really the case, then please allow me to assist you.”

The head chef shook the hand which Diabo offered him.

“We’ll be counting on you when the time comes. Until then, we’ll be working on our side.”

“Still, how exactly will you stop the closing of the Gate?”

“Well, if the ALC or Japan are being deceived, then all we need to do is tell the truth to some other country and let them lend us a hand. This might lead to an internal upheaval for a while and perhaps even a confrontation, but they’ll thank us after we clear up the misunderstanding. I’d like to ask you to help with that as well. The best way to protect that Lelei girl is to hide her in a place nobody knows about. After all, you have to start by deceiving your allies before you can trick your enemies. Thus, I hope you’ll keep it a secret from the higher-ups in the ALC. It may sound brutish, but at the same time it will be very effective because it’s unexpected.”

The head chef nodded, as though convinced.

“Come to think of it, which country will be helping us?”

“One of the countries on the other side of the Gate.” Diabo looked back to Metmes.
“Chynah, I believe it was called?”

“China. No, that country is called Chyna, Metmes. They speak a different language, but they have the same skin color as the people who live in Nihon.”

Metmes’ words seemed a little detached from reality, but to the head chef, that simply suited his nature as a prince.



After reaching the summit of Arnus Hill, Beefeater halted her horse before the JSDF contingent and shouted, “Announcing the arrival of the Emperor’s representative!”

Then, she fell off her horse.

Her descent was like a collapse after running with all her might. However, that too was part of the ceremony, as well as putting on a show. The movements codified over centuries of history had been flawlessly reproduced here.

Welcoming Beefeater was Colonel Kengun, commander of the Fourth Combat Group.

In accordance with how they had rehearsed it, Kengun fell to one knee before the herald, verifying that Beefeater was still alive.

Incidentally, Kengun had sighed heavily during their rehearsals earlier that day.

“Why do I have to do this?”

“It’s called artistic beauty. Now, run to her.”

As she heard Panache explaining the steps of the ceremony to him in exhaustive detail, Beefeater — who was pretending to be unconscious — whimpered, “Could, could it be that he hates embracing me?” as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Now, please genuflect upon your right knee. No, not your left, your right...”

A kneeling Kengun muttered, “It’s not like I hate you or anything... why are you crying? Does it hurt somewhere?” he asked in bafflement.

“Shut up! Stop blubbering and hold me!”

As those words — which Panache was hard-pressed to translate — escaped Beefeater, she flushed red, and hurriedly amended her statement.

“Ah, no, pick me up! Panache, I got it wrong just now, don’t translate that!”

As she saw Beefeater panicking, an evil grin spread across Panache’s face. She leaned in closer to Kengun’s ear and whispered something with an expression that was not entirely wholesome.

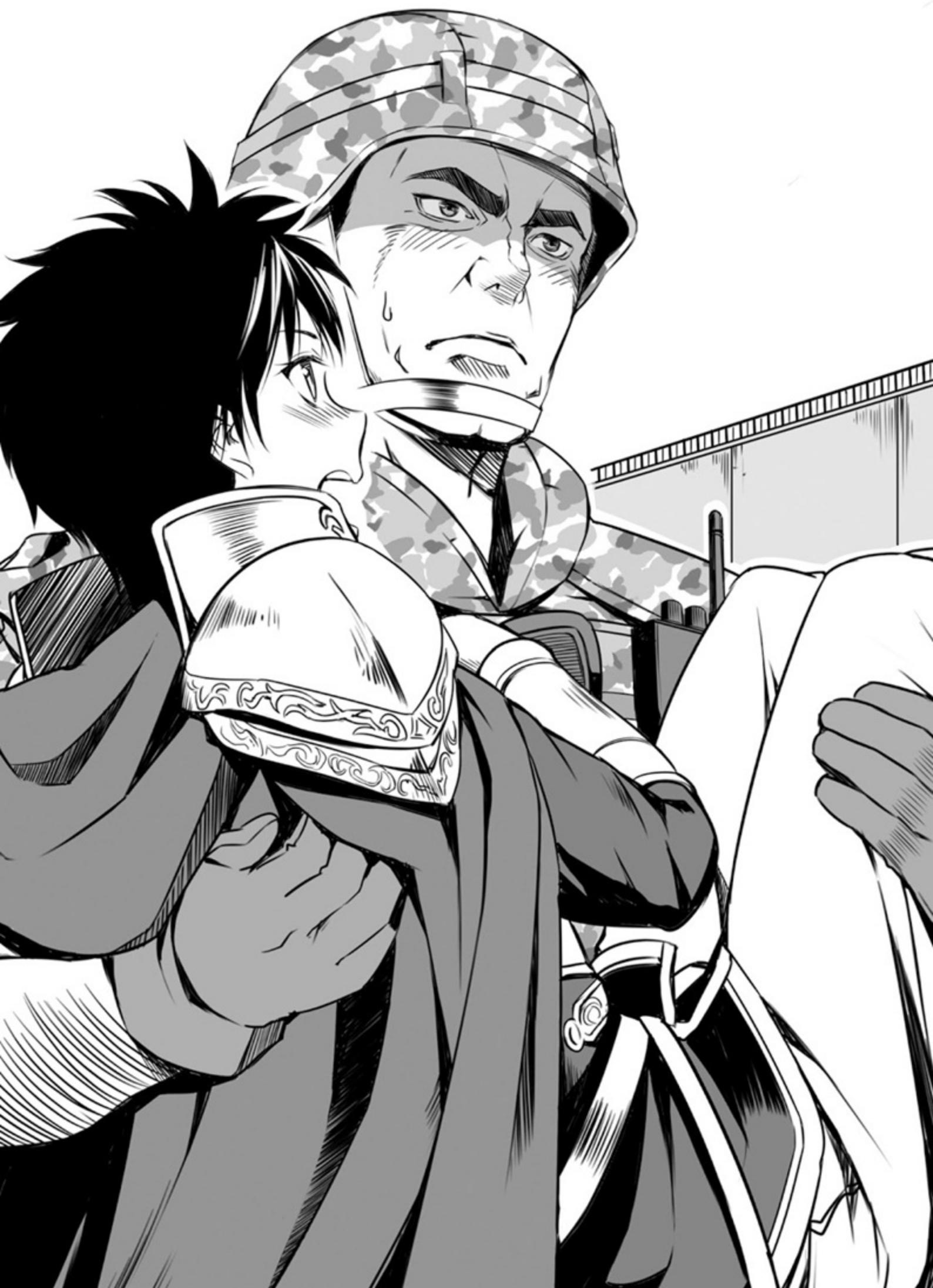
Kengun immediately blushed to the tips of his ears.

“That’s why I said, stop! Don’t translate it! Wait, Kengun, don’t touch me!”

“But if he doesn’t touch you, how will he carry you? This is all part of the ceremony. Bear with it.”

Beefeater’s face flushed red as she was picked up, flailing her limbs in protest. Yet, even her wild thrashing could not make Kengun’s iron grip waver.

Incidentally, tradition dictated that the person being carried was a man, and the person carrying him was also a man, being a general of the opposing force.



“All right, where do we go next?”

Panache looked back towards Kengun and said, “Oh, it’s not decided yet, so you can decide for yourself. If you’d like, you can bring her back to your bed too, Kengundono.”

That put Kengun on the spot.

“That’s no good, right?”

“Well, that’s true, we’ll be in quite a bind if this lust-addled woman can’t make it for the ceremony. So please wait until tonight before bedding her...”

“Like I said, that’s pretty bad, right?”

“Would it be better to say it was the rule?”

Panache shrugged.

What’s the name of this 18+ adventure game? Perhaps Itami might ask that if he had overheard this. However, the deeply moral Kengun replied:

“I don’t like that rule! This sort of thing needs to be freely chosen, through love!”

“Then... then start going out with me!”

It would seem Beefeater had been caught up in the mood of things and shouted it for everyone around to hear, while clutching Kengun’s lapels.

“Should I translate that?” Panache asked Beefeater in a very deliberate tone.

She translates unnecessary things, but won’t do so without being asked for anything concerning Kengun. Panache’s cruelty had Beefeater on the verge of tears.

“...Please.”

And so, Panache chuckled to herself as she sincere, tenderly, lovingly explained the context behind Beefeater’s exclamation.

Of course, they had not yet spoken at this point of the ceremony. The two of them seemed to be fumbling around each other on an emotional level, as though that conversation had never taken place.

Kengun picked up Beefeater, who was only pretending to have passed out, and brought her behind the ranks formed by the JSDF servicemen. Then, he laid her down.

However, for some reason Beefeater's arms were tightly fastened around Kengun's neck. Thus, it took Kengun some time to return to the rest of the unit.

"Tell me your answer."

Shame and embarrassment and other interwoven emotions rose within Beefeater, but she forced them down and whispered those words into Kengun's ear. However, those words were blocked by the language barrier.

"...What are you saying? I don't understand you at all."

Kengun was baffled, which made Beefeater shake her fist.

"Dammit... I can't wait any more."

If that was the case, all she could do was force herself on him. Yes, it was the only way.

Fortunately, everyone's eyes were fixed forward, and nobody was looking behind them.

Just as Kengun recovered from his shock, he saw over a dozen carriages containing the diplomatic contingent headed by Pina.

"Present arms!"

The entire combat group crisply delivered a coordinated salute.

The envoys advanced through the forest of bayonet points, escorted by several knights.

Pina sniggered from inside her carriage as she saw Kengun's face, muttering, "They're progressing quite well," to herself.

Kengun's lips were dyed a bright red by someone's lipstick. Of course, there was no such thing in the tradition of this ceremony, so clearly something had happened by accident.



That night, the news of Japan signing a peace treaty with the Empire went out to the entire world.

Prime Minister of the Interior Morita represented the Japanese, while Imperial Crown Princess Pina Co Lada was the Empire's representative.

After they read through and verified the contents of the treaty, Morita used an inkbrush and Pina used a fountain pen to sign two copies of the document, with one for each.

If the terms of the document were approved by the Japanese Diet and the Imperial Senate, the state of war between the Empire and Japan would be formally ended. Of course, the battle with Zorzar's forces would still continue, but the signing of the peace treaty opened a road to peace for both nations.

The following items were the highlights of the peace treaty:

The Empire admitted responsibility for the undeclared war surrounding the Ginza Incident and publicly apologized for doing so. (The Empire did not consider taking military action without a formal declaration of war to be a crime. Thus, they saw no reason to apologize for doing so. Their reasoning was that civilian casualties which resulted were the fault of the Nihonjin's carelessness and slow reaction. However, after these peace talks, the Empire accepted the idea that one had to declare war before waging it.

Emperor Molt assumed responsibility for this incident and would abdicate his position within two Imperial years of the signing of the treaty.

The Empire would pay 152'000'000 suwanis in reparations. 22'000'000 of that amount would be paid in one lump sum, while the remainder would be paid within 20 Imperial years. In addition, payment would commence after the legitimate Imperial government retook the Imperial Capital.

The Japanese would take care not to cause economic upheavals in the Special Region after receiving payment. Since there were no common traders between both sides, the Imperial government would not attempt to lower the gold content of their currency and similar action.

The Empire would cede the 100 leagues (160km, roughly 80'000 sq km) around Arnus to the Japanese, not including the domain of House Formal and the territories of other races and lords. Both sides agreed that they would not violate the newly established borders.

The Empire would surrender the mineral and prospecting rights of all mines (with the exception of precious metal mines used for the minting of currency) within 1000 leagues of Arnus (roughly 804'000 sq km) to the Japanese. However, the Japanese would need to take the greatest care not to disrupt the environment and the working conditions of Imperial citizens as a result of their activities.

The Empire and Japan would establish a state-managed trade policy.

The Empire would permit its vassal nations, the Elbe Kingdom, its lords and other tribes diplomatic rights and acknowledge their independently established diplomatic ties with Japan.

There were other details, but on the whole, the Empire would provide privileged treatment to the other party one sidedly and forfeit custom taxation. Although they had the right to exercise judicial authority over Japanese citizens, there were limits to the punishments which could be imposed.

All this seemed quite unfair to onlookers.

However, this was also intended to address the Empire's taxation and dictatorial rule over its vassal nations and lesser domains. At a glance, both sides acknowledged that there had to be limits, which was different from taking advantage of the other party's ignorance of signing themselves over to an unfair treaty. Thus, the treaty's appendix included a clause which would allow for reconsideration of these terms after the Empire's legal system was re-established..

The journalists' eyes were fixed on the released material, and they rushed to report in time for the news broadcasts, but many people managed to read between the lines.

From this treaty alone, it was apparent that the Japanese did not intend to sever ties with the Empire for at least 20 years. That point implied the opposite of the current administration's stance that there might be a need to close the Gate.

Of course, the reporters flooded the Japanese with questions to that effect. They asked if there was a way to open the Gate once more, as the rumors apparently claimed, or if they were not going to close the Gate at all.

Following that, Morita replied:

"The decision to close the Gate is one of grave import, because the Gate is an important passage linking the soil of Japan and the other side. How shall we continue maintaining this link? As various reports have stated, many strange occurrences are currently taking place. However, the true headache is the fact that current scientific knowledge cannot conclusively prove that these phenomena are associated with the Gate. Thus, though we may be unsure about it, we must make a decision on how to deal with this problem. Soon, we will be forced to make a great decision. Currently, we are in the essential intelligence-gathering phase, so I hope you will all take that into consideration."

Haven't you decided already?

With that thought in mind, the reporters bombarded him with questions. However, the Prime Minister simply answered, "Not yet. The treaty may assume that the Gate will remain open, but it was signed with the intention of progressing the situation toward a positive resolution."

In the end, he did not give the reporters a straight answer to their questions.

After the signing of the treaty, the delegates and contingents of both parties took a brief rest in the Hagoromo Suite before a dinner event sponsored by the Japanese government. For a moment, they relaxed in the sensation of a great weight lifted off their shoulders, chatting with teacups in hand like it was a regular party. However, the topics discussed here eventually drifted toward the matter of the Special Region and that of the Gate.

Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure and the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (among others) stood by the window, racking their brains about how to deal with Arnus Province, which was a newly-incorporated domain of Japan.

They had gained much through signing the peace treaty, so they could not help dwelling on those things.

“After considering factional balance, we should appoint Nomoto as the Special Region Development Minister. The question is who we’re going to send as the state administrative officer.”

The “Special Region Area Management Special Administrative Act” was passed in the Diet at the same time as the treaty was approved. That entailed the establishment of a Development Office in the Special Region, as well as a local administrative bureau and a state administrative officer. The administrative officer would hold elections for local officials and manage the Special Region’s administrative infrastructure. At a glance, his role seemed like one of a governor

The problem now was that these were positions offering great power and privilege. The main responsibility of someone in those roles would be to oversee the Special Region development projects, allocate budget, and take care of other problems which arose. The conservatives immediately began aiming for these positions, and they headhunted people for the Special Region Development Office. However, once they learned that they would actually have to reside in the Special Region to carry out their duties, their interest cooled in a hurry.

This was because they would be stranded in the Special Region if the Gate had to be closed, and if they were unlucky they would not have contact with Japan for a long time.

“We can’t close the Gate after all. Delaying it by a couple of days should be fine if nothing goes wrong, correct?”

There were people who would change their demands just to secure privileges for themselves. But the opinion of “let’s keep the Gate open” lost its persuasive power in the face of the inability to affect the economic world. After all, one needed a major investment in order to open mines and build factories to turn a huge profit. If they had to close the Gate due to the various phenomena in the world and lose access to them, it would be a crippling loss for them.

“If we want to invest in the Special Region, we need a guarantee that we can maintain lines of communication to this world.”

“In any case, we need to temporarily close the Gate and let the phenomena clear up.”

“And abandon everything in the Special Region until then?”

Nations had no consciences. Even the territory and rights ceded by the Empire could be taken by other countries if they did not continue enforcing their ownership on them.

“I’m also uneasy about having to rely on specific individuals to manage the Gate. What if that girl changes her mind about helping us for some reason?”

“Why not leave the JSDF there? Let them keep an eye on things.”

“How could we do that? Almost everyone here has a family. If things go poorly, they may not see them again for the rest of their lives. How could the servicemen and their families agree to that?”

“That’s why I’m saying, we should recruit volunteers to stay in the region. The war with the Empire is over, so we won’t need so much fighting strength.”

“Recruiting entire families for migration? Well, if the terms are good enough, it might actually work out. Let’s not limit ourselves to the JSDF, but ask for volunteers from the entire nation.”

“Still, if we do that, we’ll need to consider sending someone there to serve as a state administrative official. We can’t have military rule over there.”

“Why don’t we pick from the proportionally elected candidates? We can give them a guaranteed 3rd or 4th seat in their election register.”

“That means Matsuzaka, Emoto, Katagiri... is that it?”

“No no no, Katagiri doesn’t know anything about safety. We need someone who can handle domestic and foreign affairs.”

“How about a former Prime Minister? Tell him that this is the final sacrifice he must make for his country...”

“Still, age will be a problem. We need to consider their health and stamina.”

“Then who will PM Morita send?”

“The PM’s on thin ice, though. He appeased the masses by signing the peace treaty, but either closing or keeping the Gate open could have grave consequences for the administration.”

“The problem now is public opinion. The opposition will definitely turn the problem of the Gate into a talking point, because the media will attack by saying that there’s no need to close the Gate. Since they’ll be biased towards the opposition, they’ll be fine no matter what they say, right?”

“No matter what, I don’t want to make the Gate an election issue. I’d prefer to settle this matter before that.”

“Excuse me, may I cut in?”

Kogure and his colleagues turned around in surprise as they were addressed.

However, they did not see the owner of the voice. They looked around, but it was only after they heard her say, “I am Sherry Nol Tuery,” that they thought of looking down.

“Who... who might you be?”

“Ah, this girl is the Empire’s emissary.”

After hearing the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism speak, Kogure and the others nodded in understanding.

“So you’re the envoy from the Empire? Ah, no... did I phrase that poorly? My apologies, Countess. I have heard the rumors. They say you are very capable.”

“Please, do not worry. As you can see, I am a child, so please, address me as you would a junior.”

“Really now? The Special Region has many ladies whose appearances do not match their age.”

Kogure and the others recalled those ladies, whom they had often seen recently due to the talks.

They appeared youthful, but Rory, Tuka and Yao were older than their own mothers and hearing their tones of voice gave them pause. In addition, when confronted with Lelei, who was actually youthful, they realised that she was one to watch, given the importance of her abilities.

“I understand that this is a deeply disrespectful question to ask of a lady, but I must swallow that shame and ask; may I inquire as to your age?”

“I am 12.”

“Two elf...?”

“However, an Imperial year is 389 days long, so I would be 13 Japanese years old.”

“I see. So by age, you would be in middle school... in the first or second year... even so, you do seem like quite the little adult. Has anyone else told you that before?”

“It has been pointed out quite often recently. On that topic, words like, “She’s too full of herself” have been whispered behind my back as well.

Sherry looked just like a child when she pouted to express her displeasure.

“Well, it can’t be helped. Perhaps you should let it slide. Those adults who can only take pride in their age and experience will naturally feel resentful when someone lacking in both steals their limelight. When searching for things to criticize, even youthfulness becomes a flaw to be targeted.”

“In any event, just take it as people being jealous of you, my dear.”

With that, Kogure and the others tried to comfort the bitter-faced girl.

“Speaking of which, I heard something about the election.”

“Are you interested in elections, then?”

“Yes. In the past, the Empire was democratically governed. However, it grew ineffective as our territory increased, which resulted in our present imperial government. I am quite interested in how the country and people of Nihon have applied the rule of democracy.”

“I see. So we can consider the Empire of the past to have been governed in the style of ancient Greece or Rome, then?”

“Probably. When it comes to risk management, centralized authority and dictatorial rule is more effective than democracy, hence the transition.”

“Dictatorships easily lead to self-aggrandizement, however. Safety measures against such actions are hard to implement under dictatorships.”

As Kogure muttered to himself, she chimed in with a disturbed look on her face.

“I overheard you speaking about making a decision about the Gate before the election.”

“Ahhh. Currently in Japan, we’re deciding how to deal with the strange phenomena. The media has no sense of the danger we’re facing and they’re pushing the message of ‘Don’t close the Gate’, but as people who are responsible for the nation’s safety, we can’t just accept that opinion.”

“I find your astute judgement in doing what needs to be done — even if the people do not approve of it — quite refreshing. In the past, democracy failed in the Empire because those in power merely pandered to the masses. I wish the politicians of the time could have drunk the soup from your nails.”

(TL Note: Sherry uses the phrase 爪の垢を煎じて飲む, or, to boil the dirt from under someone’s fingernails into a soup and drink it, in order to learn from them.)

“Nail soup... well, it’s an archaic turn of phrase, but it sounds quite novel when it comes from a foreigner.”

“Thank you. I did put some effort into it.”

"Still, it grates on the ear to hear that democratic rule gave way to autocracy because of pandering to the masses. Quite a few among us think only of increasing our public appeal. 'Down with political privileges! Down with the officials who cling to their gains!' They raise targets and fan the flames of resentment. They deceive the people by talking big and declaring that all will be well as long as certain people are torn down."

"In the Empire, wars were a tool to gain popularity. That was also how democratic rule began to collapse, my history teacher said."

"I suppose the citizens of any country do love victory."

"Yes. And as long as you win, the people will choose you... from there, it is easy to see how the trend began."

"Win and be elected, correct?"

Kogure murmured to himself as he mused over Sherry's words. Seeing Kogure in this state, Sherry took the initiative.

"If that's the case, I would like to swiftly ease the internal troubles of the Empire, but can we count on Nihon's support for that?"

"Umu. If we don't defeat Zorzel, the war won't be considered over. And if Zorzel somehow conquers the Empire, the peace talks will be meaningless. In addition, because of *somebody*, the reparations will not be paid until the Imperial Capital is retaken."

"I am deeply mortified. Please, do not bully me so."

Sherry lowered her head in embarrassment.

"As if we would. It's fine. In truth, your arrival helped us out a lot."

"By that you mean..."

"In all honesty, Japan's been too successful in our military engagements with the Special Region. Perhaps that's why our negotiators have been too forceful and focused on what demands they can make of the Empire. There's no give and take, and no

restraint. I feel this is because they don't want to be criticized for not obtaining what they could have gotten because they gave in. In any case, Shirayuri and the others were wound too tight."

"..Wound too tight, you say."

"Indeed. In other words, they were too addicted to scourging the Imperial diplomats with words, no? But then you showed up, didn't you? Shirayuri and the others were thrown into confusion. They couldn't go hard on you, and so they decided to pull back with grace. Thus, the matter was settled successfully."

"These negotiations were not accomplished by my abilities alone, so I trust you are advising me not to push my luck. Thank you very much for your wise counsel."

"No no, it wasn't my intention to be so harsh. Although, I feel that it would be quite beneficial for you if you understood our situation here."

"Thank you very much. I will engrave it into my heart."

"I hope so. There will be many things my country and the Empire will have to discuss. I'll look forward to them."

"Ah, but, in truth, I was planning to marry into Sugawara-sama's family, so I feel there may not be many chances for me to serve as an Imperial emissary and speak with you gentlemen."

"Sugawara.? ...Who's this Sugawara?" Kogure whispered to one of the diplomatic personnel.

"Ahhh, that guy. Well, that is a shame."

The politicians repeated in unison, "What a shame."

"In truth, being able to speak with a lovely young lady like yourself in the grim halls of power is a breath of fresh air. We would all be very lonely without someone like yourself around."

"But, that, that..."

“It can’t be helped. Still, if you’re 13, then you should still be able to remain active in the Empire for three more years.”

“But...”

“What is it?”

“Dear gentlemen of Nihon, how do you intend to deal with the Gate?”

“Hm. We feel that the Gate should be closed. That will happen after we defeat Zorral, restore relations with the Empire, and lock down a system of governance for Arnus in the period before the Gate is closed.”

“Is that so. Then, will Sugawara-sama return to Japan?”

“He is an employee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, so as long as he is not appointed the ambassador to the Empire, he will be recalled to Japan, I think.”

In truth, this was a problem for them. The real headache was how many and who to leave in the Special Region, which they might not ever see again.

“Is that so. I understand. I will take that into consideration for my future plans.”

“You really do like that guy, huh.”

“Yes!”

Sherry answered so brightly and cheerfully that Kogure and the others were briefly at a loss for words.

“Speaking of which, I’d like to ask for reference, but without Zorral, the Empire’s internal troubles would be gone, am I correct? The Imperial government began these peace talks to destroy Zorral with the help of Japan. If we eliminated him, that would make Japan the greatest source of suffering, am I correct?”

“Indeed. The Empire may have ceded Arnus to us, but they were probably not very willing to do so. That being the case, we should probably leave more fighting strength behind before closing the Gate,” added the Minister of Land, Infrastructure, Transport

and Tourism. He must have been quite unguarded to speak his mind before Sherry the emissary.

“Indeed, that is true. However, I feel there is no need to be so worried.”

The men leaned forward as they heard her speak.

“Why is that?”

“It is true that your worries would be well founded if one only took into consideration Japan and the Empire. However, if one looks beyond the Empire and at the nearby factions, one will realise that the Empire needs Nihon. After defeating Zorzal-sama, the Imperial government will maintain good ties with Nihon.”

“I’ve received briefings about the various forces surrounding the Empire. Has its influence on the continent declined so greatly?”

“I hesitate to report on our shame, but many nations resent the Empire for their deplorable act of forcibly recruiting their armies for the Coalition Army. Thus, the Empire will have great difficulty in enforcing its rule like it did in the past. As a result, many people have elected not to follow Zorzal-sama or His Majesty. Even when this rebellion is dealt with, their hearts will remain the same, though the situation may appear to have changed.”

“When the Empire is united again, will it be able to regain its former zone of influence?”

“Regretfully, a factor exists which complicates the matter.”

“And that would be?”

“Prior to this, the Empire was a country that was composed of, and exist for humanity. But thanks to this internal uprising, His Majesty has reached out to the demihuman tribes for aid. As a result, I predict that the demihumans will gain in status.”

“A racial problem, then...”

“Yes. Because of that, Nihon should show its strength while subjugating Zorzal-sama. In this way, the vassal nations will bend the knee to the Empire on the surface, but

they will also be mindful of the existence of the land of Nihon. At the same time, it will improve the attitude of the demihuman residents of Arnus toward Nihon. The Empire will be compared to Nihon and they will seek to improve their relationship with Nihon in order to awe the vassal nations. This will ensure the safety and sovereignty of Arnus."

"I see... I see, I see, so that's how it is. Then we won't have to leave so many men behind."

Secretary Kogure seemed to have realised something as he rubbed his palms together and nodded.

He seemed uneasy as he looked around. Soon, he said, "Excuse me" and headed toward the Prime Minister, who was talking and laughing with Pina.

"He's got a bad habit of passing off ideas he's heard from other people as his own."

"Really?"

Sherry tilted her head, feigning a look of cluelessness, and then stuck her tongue out at him while nobody was looking.



"The time is ripe, we should launch an all-out attack!"

Chief Cabinet Secretary Kogure shook his fist before the Cabinet for emphasis.

"Of course," Kanou nodded sagely. Natsume spoke up in support as well. There was no opposition from the other Cabinet ministers, and they unanimously approved of Kogure's suggestion. And so, the combined militaries of Japan and the Empire began working together to mount an offensive upon Zorzar's forces.

That was only to be expected, because it was in Japan's national interests. That said, it also furthered their personal interests in that they could regain their public approval via victory over Zorzar and by conducting peace talks with the Empire. This would in turn ensure adequate representation in the upcoming elections.

That said, the war which they were waging would not just expend money, but lives. Thus some people used the latter as an excuse to level criticism at them. However, humans were hopeless creatures that were motivated entirely by self-benefit. Activities undertaken for profit were one thing, but even altruistic endeavours, while appearing selfless and kind, were actually performed to satisfy one's personal motives.

The difference was that instead of financial and other material rewards, they received intangible rewards instead, like a sense of fulfilment and satisfaction. It was quite easy to label such activities as hypocrisy, but if endeavors motivated for personal gain did not exist, then such opinions would be entirely meaningless.

Censuring people for such things was the same as blaming people for eating plants, or criticizing them for excreting bodily wastes and making the visit to the bathroom a blamable act.

What truly needed to be addressed was the priority of personal interests over the public good.

As long as there was no conflict of interests and both could be fulfilled by heading in the same direction, then there would be no problem. Of course, people defined the meaning of "public good" in their minds, but problems only arose when one pursued their personal interests at the expense of the public good. The hypocritical act of pursuing personal gain over the benefit of society was what truly deserved censure.

For instance, by paying no heed to reality and wildly chasing after one's ideals.

A leader whose actions were to the detriment of his country could only be considered a misfortune by its citizens.

"All things begin with good intentions". These words were spoken by Julius Caesar, who later became a dictator, but even people like Hitler, Pol Pot and Stalin did not seize power with the goal of making life miserable for other people.

However, their good intentions were too extreme. Forced to extremes by the dissonance between their ideals and reality, they ended up making their people suffer.

In that sense, Morita's Cabinet were mundane and little men.

They had great ambitions, but did not pursue them to a great degree. Neither were they thick-skinned enough to arrogantly dress up their desire for personal gain as a public benefit.

They were simply cowards who combined their personal objectives with the public good and asked around “is this all right” and then breathed a sigh of relief when their proposals were accepted. It was because of this reason that when they set their minds to it and committed to a course, what resulted was bold and forceful action.

The Cabinet’s decision was immediately relayed to the Special Region Expeditionary Force.

The servicemen at Arnus were all fired up.

“Son of a bitch, I’ve been waiting for this!”

“Let’s wipe them out!”

The JSDF troopers at Arnus had been very unhappy with the depressing task of defending the area around Arnus.

If all they did was react to the enemy, then they would forever be on the back foot. They were miserable from not being able to prevent the deaths of the local people. But if they were mounting an offensive, then everything would be different. The JSDF would finally take control of the engagements.

The breaths they had been holding spilled out at once.

The men’s morale soared rapidly, and even their day to day tasks were filled with vigor.

The Imperial government was also in a high-energy state.

This was because letters had been sent out to various countries. They read, *“The Empire and Nihon are at peace! Let us defeat Zorzar, the enemy of peace! Those who can work will be put to use. The Empire guarantees that all will be rewarded as they have performed, regardless of race, species, or past history.”*

Once these letters went out, reinforcements came from all around. They did not just come from the pro-peace faction, but even some vassal nations who had hitherto begged off from involvement in the war using various excuses.

And then, even former bandits and the mercenaries who had previously walked away from their contracts had showed up in force.

Thus the army of the true Imperial administration became one which rivalled Zorzar's own forces.

"Nobles of the Empire, do not make the mistake of assuming this strength is your own. Well, the fact is, we all know who's *really* in charge of this continent now."

King Duran of the Elbe Kingdom muttered thus to himself astride his Wyvern, even as he commanded his troops to advance.

"Please! Allow the Anti-Zorzar Army to march from Italica!"

The marshals of the true Imperial army bowed their heads to the table at which the JSDF also sat.

There was no denying that the JSDF would be the main force which would destroy Zorzar. However, they pointed out that if they did not at least give the impression that the Imperial army was doing the work and the JSDF was merely supporting operations, it would cause problems after the war.

It was a waste of effort, from a purely military point of view. But their proposal made sense when one considered what would happen after the battle, and thus it could not be casually discarded. This was because the payment of reparations and the collection and transport of resources would be affected if the Empire was plunged into needless chaos.

Therefore, the coalition army which set out from Italica was designated as the main body of the anti-Zorzar forces. In this way, the Imperial army could claim that they were the ones who had defeated Zorzar. The JSDF would serve as a supporting force, and commence operations in other areas (primarily Arnus).

"The 4th Combat Group will cover the departure from Italica."

As Hazama had said, the JSDF unit deploying with the Imperial army would be the 4th Combat Group, led by Colonel Kengun.

“General! If we must move in tandem with the Imperial army, our forces’ mobility will be greatly hampered.”

If they had to keep pace with cavalry or infantry units, their precious aerial mobility would be put to waste. Kengun had brought that objection up at the strategic meeting. However, Hazama paid it no heed.

“The 4th Combat Group has done enough fighting in the previous engagements. This time, they shall rest and yield the stage to the other units. We will need the use of the helicopters for resupplying the coalition forces along the longest and most dangerous route of advance.”

It was not that he could not take Hazama’s rarely-given observations to heart. But it was quite unreasonable to the militant Kengun. *My men were the ones running around on the frontline, but what does all our hard work count for if you take away our role at the critical moment?*

That was what Kengun thought.

Thus, Kengun rounded up the generals from the Imperial Army who were under his command, and announced:

“Let’s get this out of the way first: this is a competition.”

We are the ones who will defeat Zorzar, while the JSDF supports us. The nobles, who had mustered their forces with that thought in mind, dissolved into commotion as Shandy’s translation filtered through them.

“But, but if you do that, the agreement...”

“What did the agreement say?”

“Didn’t we already settle the matter by having us be the main body of the anti-Zorzar forces?”

“Correct! Isn’t that why the 4th Combat Group led by the veteran Kengun-dono is moving with us?” the generals chattered.

“Correct. And the JSDF will assist you. However, assistance in this case can also include destroying Zorral’s troops. If this keeps up, we’ll end up being nothing more than a parade unit walking into the Imperial Capital. That’s another way the agreement can be read.”

“Then, then what glory will there be for us?!”

“Like I was saying, this is a competition.”

Kengun looked around himself. The generals of the Imperial army were silent, as were their surroundings.

“Once the battle starts, the others won’t wait for us.”

“But, but, the agreement, our glory...”

Kengun interrupted the Imperial nobles, who were starting to repeat themselves.

“There is war because there are enemies. Allowing allies to be tied up by that will put our soldiers into danger. If we fall behind because of that, don’t you think that’s a failing of ours?”

After that, Sherry elbowed Pina who was sitting nearby, and she reluctantly stood up. Although she did not seem motivated at all, Pina was not so slothful that she was incapable of thinking, so she pointed to a map which covered the ground, declaring “Because of that, your lordships must hustle with all your might.”

Pina’s whip traced a line from Italica to the city of Telta.

Between them were the fortresses Mare, Fyue and Rekki, as well as other fortifications Zorral had set up to hamper the Imperial Army’s advance.

“The road we must travel is long, and the foes which impede us are mighty. As Kengun-dono says, if this battle is, indeed, a competition, then we are starting from unfavorable circumstances.”

Italica was closer to the Imperial Capital compared to Arnus, but their forces would still be setting out on the same day. If they had to destroy every single fortress in their way, they would not be able to keep up with the other troops, which were mechanized and possessed of tremendous destructive power.

The generals held their breath as they considered the distance they had to travel.

One of them seemed to have his doubts about Pina's tone, and strayed from the topic.

"It would seem your Highness' words indicate that you do not wish to participate in this battle."

Pina nodded.

"Am I not the Emperor's representative? Then I shall remain in Italica, and await the good news from your lordships."

With that, the generals bowed slightly in approval.

"That is wonderful news. I feared your Highness would consider herself the spearhead of the army and seek to charge into the fray."

"Things being as they are, I can no longer afford to be so reckless, am I wrong?"

The generals nodded, and Sherry nodded beside her as well.

"Because of that, I hope your lordships will obey Kengun-dono's commands. I am counting on all of you."

"But, to think even we must dismount and fight, this..."

"Indeed. If we mix with the levies, we will not be able to relay adequate commands, nor will we be able to gain a clear picture of the situation. Tactics like these are unprecedented."

"Any tactician who can only follow the precedents is second-rate at best. If we were fighting aboard a ship, we would all be dismounted, no? Think of it in that way. If you want to gain glory, give it a try."

The generals grit their teeth in resentment as they heard Pina's detached words.

Still, she did have a point, so they did not hate her for it.

In this battle, the Imperial would be counting on the JSDF for transport, logistics, communications, and many other things. If they rejected JSDF command, then they would be in the unenviable position of having to figure all that out for themselves.

Representing the legitimate Imperial Government, Pina turned and bowed to Kengun.

"Kengun-dono, I'm entrusting these men to you."

Kengun bowed in response.

"Understood, Your Highness. Now, I shall outline the operation plan. Once I explain it to you, all your doubts should evaporate in smoke. Our combined operations will falter if there are any loopholes or uncertainties on either of our parts. Therefore, I will accept any questions from you and I will answer and explain them. Thus, I hope you gentlemen will speak freely of any doubts or opinions you have."

Kengun looked around to all of them and said, "Then, please open the files at hand."

And then, Shandy of the knight band began explaining.



"Commence operations!"

General Hazama's commands were carried to the various battle groups of the Special Region Expeditionary Force.

"Shiro, Kuro, Matcha, Yuzu, Mame, Ume, Momo, Sakura, Sakura!"

After receiving the coded signal to begin operations, the combat groups started moving.

"Good. Advance!"

Dirt and dust curled up into the air, and columns of armored vehicles blanketed the land even as helicopter squadrons blotted out the sky, each heading toward their respective objectives to conduct their assaults.

First, the JASDF's Phantoms penetrated deep into the territory controlled by Zorzar.

Their high-explosive bombs shattered their fortress' defenses and destroyed all bridges save the ones which would be used for the advance, while napalm bombs consumed field camps in roaring flames.

Although six Phantoms alone were not enough, they unloaded all their firepower with the benefit of intricately plotted bombing courses, severing communications and transport lines while ensuring aerial supremacy.

The troops in their barracks were still going about their daily lives. Thus, before they even knew the attack had begun, they were killed by falling rocks and logs or engulfed in fire from the sky, while the survivors were cut off from supplies and completely isolated.

The next wave of attack was heralded by the sky-shattering thunder of artillery shells.

The earth shook violently and dust flew into the air. Walls were breached and the soldiers scurried around, looking for safe places to hide.

Anyone who had witnessed this and was unlucky enough to remain alive then gazed upon the shapes of a horde of iron war elephants.

“What, what are those...”

The vanguard of the JSDF was composed of Type 74 main battle tanks. The thunderous roar of their advance pared away at the already-broken fighting spirit of the beleaguered troops before them. The words “run away” shone brightly in their minds.

“The hell are you doing! Hold the line and charge!”

However, the kobold-masked oprichniki brandished their weapons and cursed at the men who were planning to flee. The threat of losing their lives rekindled the flagging morale of the men.

They struggled to work up their dwindling courage, steeling themselves to battle the iron elephant statues with blade, spear, and even battle magic.

“Advance! Advance!”

They loosed arrows and couched their lances as they charged.

However, their counterattack was not born of a willingness to fight or any reasoned tactic. This was essentially a frenzied suicide attack. Their enemy was like a ferocious tide and the Imperial soldiers like fragile plywood; the waters crashed against them, and they were broken.

The panicked Imperial commanders watched as the enemy advanced toward them as if they were heading into unclaimed territory. Looks of despair grew on their faces. They had no idea what to do, or how to stop that fearsome onslaught.

“Captain! Where are the friendlies who were supposed to be in front of us?”

“The enemy’s there, so they must have been defeated.”

“No way! How could that be?!”

They could not believe that their allies had been crushed without any resistance offered.

“Now’s not the time to argue. All we can do is advance and fight. Tell the people behind that the enemy has come. If we can just delay them a little, the friendlies behind us will be able to deploy better than we have. Go now!”

After the guard captain issued his orders to the runners, he rounded up his men for a charge.

Still, even though they lashed their horses and braced their lances and rushed the enemy, they were halted by a hail of lead from the vehicle-mounted machine guns. They could not even get close to them.

After many of their friends had died, those few who managed to engage the enemy in melee with their lances found their blows turned by sturdy armor, their lances shattering with heartbreaking cracks.

The shrill fractures inflicted the cavalry's own shock right back upon them.

Riders were thrown by their horses and cast to the ground one after the other. And then, while they were still squirming and crawling around in the muck, the caterpillar treads of the iron giants ran right over them.

"Is this even a battle?!"

This could not be considered warfare at all. It was utter humiliation, an Imperial soldier shouted.

In the past, when they fought barbarians or demihumans, they had done so honorably and properly, since their aim was to exterminate them. Bodies covered in blood, they had hacked with swords, stabbed with lances, and perforated with arrows. They had raped women, burned houses and looted treasure. They looked each other in the eye, their blades gleaming and their shields clashing. Even now, they could still recall their enemies.

But these people did not engage in any of that at all. They completely ignored the Imperials, casting them aside like pebbles along the road. They burned them, crushed them, trampled them flat, like they were bulldozing a road in the desert.

"Shit!"

They could not beat the enemy. They could not even make the enemy notice them. The men of the Imperial army gnashed their teeth and fumed impotently at this unreasoning violence. This was the taste of defeat.

Still, they had some options.

For instance, they could fall back to regroup. In addition, they could order a general retreat and regroup elsewhere. They should have been able to stubbornly hold out against the enemy advance in that way.

However, the kobold-masked fellow who had been recently attached to the commanders refused to let them do so. The oprichniki forced the Imperial troopers to challenge the enemy before them, to fight and win.

“You want us to die?”

“As if. If you win, you live. So win! Go and win!”

“Shit! Send out the armored Ogres! Wyvern archers, take aim from above!”

The Giant Ogres, sheathed in heavy armor and bearing massive shields, lumbered forward.

Every step they took radiated an ankle-swallowing weight. Their massive forms looked quite reassuring to the troopers.

As the Imperial soldiers looked at the wall-like shields carried by the Giant Ogres and saw that they could deflect the enemies' bullets, they forgot that they had once called them animals. The soldiers hid behind the Ogres as they advanced, in contrast to how they had looked down on them before.

In addition, the effects of the distant arrow fire from the Wyvern riders was immediately obvious.

The Nihonjin soldiers fled back into their metal boxes after the rain of arrows.

“Good, that's it! Encircle them and they'll be rats in a trap!”

“Flip them over!”

“Light the fire! Launch the stones!”

“Charge! Charge!”

In response to the Imperial soldiers' hopes, the armored Ogres hurled cabers and boulders.

The cabers gouged out vast pits on the ground, and the boulders which hit the tanks shattered like an explosion, sending powdery debris everywhere.

“Ohhhh!”

“It’s working! We might win this!”

“Good! Now, swamp the enemy! Battering ram teams, advance!”

The battering rams emerged from the rear as they were pushed forward.

They were sharpened logs mounted on wagons, designed to break city walls and chisel out holes. Their plan was to strike the tanks — which were comparable to mobile fortresses — and leave them immobile. In addition, the wagons were loaded with firewood and oil, ready to be ignited.

The soldiers gathered up and desperately pushed them forward.

“All right, charge!”

At first, they moved slowly. But the battering rams gradually picked up speed, until the soldiers propelling them could not keep up and fell on their faces. They scattered sparks in all directions and charged forth at startling speeds.

A hail of bullets swept across monsters and men, and they fell like flies.

Even so, once the momentum had started, it could not be stopped. The battering rams picked up speed as they went downhill, flying off the ground with every little bump they encountered, speeding forward as they did.

Some battering rams could not take the excessive speed and vibration. They disintegrated as their wheels fell off.

Sparks flew as the massive rams, each the size of a tree, fell to the ground. The soldiers pushing them were dragged underfoot. Some were buried beneath the rams while others became running, screaming pyres.

And then, one of the numberless battering rams finally struck the flank armor of a Type 74 tank.

The startling impact jarred the ram loose from its harness. Only the huge log remained; wood chips, oil and fire flew all around.

The tank's body was shaken by the impact, wreathed in the flames of oil and kindling.

“We did it!”

As they saw the burning tank, the Imperial soldiers whooped in joy.

Now that they could wound their once-invincible foe, they joyfully pumped their fists into the air.

But before long, that jubilation was replaced by a despondent silence.

That was because the flame-wreathed tank continued moving, like nothing had happened.

“What?”

The JSDF had studied movies beforehand, and they had accounted for this. Their vehicle's flanks were covered by camouflaged logs, hung there ahead of time.

The sharpened points which should have stuck in their wheels and immobilized them were instead blocked by the logs. Having discarded these logs and the flames shrouding them, the tanks trampled the remains of the battering rams and continued their advance.

“Kuh! ...We're not done yet! Armored Ogres, form vanguard!”

The Imperial troopers brought the Giant Ogres to the forefront, in preparation for an advance. If they could close the gap to the reach of sword and spear, thus bogging them down in melee combat, they had a chance of victory.

Or so they thought.

“Testudo!”

The armored Ogres clustered up to defend against the bullets raining down on them. Their shields faced forward, above and on both sides. The monster drovers and the

Imperial troops hunkered down within that formation. However, that instead allowed them to see the horrible sight of hole after hole being punched in those heavy shields.

Within that darkened space, they saw light streaming in through each little hole, like the stars coming out at night.

Anyone but the Giant Ogres would have a hard time lifting those steel-plate shields. Even they could not stop the holes made by the rounds from 12.7mm heavy machine guns.

Even so, the Giant Ogres were covered in armor of comparable thickness, and their morale was still good. That was because they could still count on their armor even after their shields were breached. However, the Imperial soldiers were lightly armored in comparison, and it was much harder on them.

Bullet fragments ricocheted inside the darkened space, and the soldiers collapsed to the ground, moaning as their blood sprayed all around, covering their faces as they died in droves.

After taking roughly 50 percent casualties during their advance, they finally reached the enemy.

The whistle signalling the charge blew, and the Armored Ogres broke their testudo formation. The Imperial soldiers swarmed forth to engage the tanks in melee. The armored Ogres lifted their clubs behind them, preparing to throw them at the tanks' armor.

However —

Flames spat from the snouts of the iron elephant statues, all lined up in a row.

The L7A1 tank guns fired 105mm/51 armor-piercing fin-stabilised discarding sabot rounds.

Even the armored Ogres could not withstand a direct hit from those rounds at point blank range. The Ogres fell one after the other, with gaping holes blown in their bodies.

The thunderous impact threw the infantry back, and then followed a silence so profound it seemed unreal.

The Type 74 tanks reloaded.

“Fire!”

It was all the Imperial soldiers could do to throw themselves on the ground to avoid being blown away by the ear-shattering noise and the ferocious impact battering their entire bodies.

The great shields that had taken direct hits from the tank cannon were blasted into the air like scattered leaves and then they fell, drawn down by gravity. The Imperial soldiers, unable to flee in time, were crushed under the metal slabs.

This was the moment when all organized resistance by the Imperial Army disintegrated.

Contorted in pain, the armored Ogres fell onto their backs, dragging down the Imperial soldiers behind them.

The Ogres' arms and shields were blown away in one fell swoop, and they rolled around in agony. Thus, the Imperial troops did not even have time to flee; they were smashed away one after the other by their wild flailings.

To them, there was no difference between friend and foe.

The berserk Ogres regarded everything within their field of vision as enemies. They swung wildly with their clubs, sweeping away the Imperial troops under their feet.



In the air, the Wyvern riders resorted to their favored tactics of throwing down bundles of javelins. At the same time, they tried to have their Wyverns toss rocks and oil flasks from high altitudes onto the enemy.

However, that proved futile. Their accuracy was very limited, and even if they did hit, they could only inflict cosmetic damage on the tanks, to say nothing of actually stopping them.

Of course, some of them tried attacking the bonnets of the HMVs, and they even managed to disable some of them, but it did not affect the battle in any significant way.

“How, how can we beat an enemy like this?!”

Even if they had the will to fight, even if they thirsted for victory, if they had no way to fight, then all the soldiers could do was flee.

Even the terror that the oprichniki wielded could no longer stop them.

They fiercely cast aside their useless armor and shields and weapons, and ran as fast as their breathing would allow.

And so, the Imperial army scattered in all directions, having lost all semblance of being an organized force.

They collapsed like a building under its own weight. It was a complete and utter rout.

Without any unified central command and wanting only to live, the soldiers hunkered down and looked for a chance to flee.

But there was no respite for them no matter where they ran. This was because the enemy pursued the fleeing soldiers, who had already cast off their armor to lighten themselves.

The Imperial troops were surrounded from all directions, hedged in by bayonets, and forced to surrender.

Of course, not everyone could be taken captive. A few unfortunates managed to escape.

What awaited them were the hateful gazes of the surrounding civilians. General Helm and the others might have done so in the name of fighting the JSDF, but ultimately, he and all his men had essentially waged scorched earth tactics. They had attacked villages and burned the houses and raped the women and killed the men and driven them across the land. These tactics had earned the Imperial soldiery the undying hatred of the smallfolk, and now they raised their vengeful blades against these broken men.

And so, the villagers chased them down before hacking them to pieces.

Those Imperial soldiers who realized that there was nowhere to run stepped forward, hoping that the JSDF would take them captive. The final insult was the fact that time and effort spent stripping them of their arms and sending them to the rear echelons was by far the most effective tactic in delaying JSDF's advance.



The great coalition army led by Kengun advanced swiftly down the road leading to the Imperial Capital.

Fortress Mare stood in their way. Without any hesitation, they assaulted it from the air.

After throwing the defenders into confusion with rocket attacks, the combat helicopters swooped in over their heads, bypassing the fortress walls and gates, and then they suddenly dropped soldiers onto the spires in the depths of the fortress.

From the point of view of Zorzar's men, they had been caught in a pincer attack. Their most heavily-fortified strongholds were suddenly exposed to attack, and their chain of command was severed.

In addition, the "Iron Dragonflies" flitted around, drowning the fleeing troops of Zorzar's forces in rains of lead, while dropping infantry from the legitimate Imperial army.

It was all they could do to fight the foe in front of them. Things like finding the gaps in the enemy formation for attack or feigned retreats to lure them into advantageous terrain were completely beyond them.

The enemies came from the front and the rear, and Zorzar's troops were encircled in an instant, with no recourse but to flee.

Even so, there were people occupying what looked like a bunker, who planned to give further resistance.

They had a polybolos trained on a narrow passage where only one person could approach at a time, so nobody could get close. Many soldiers lurked within. The corpses of the loyalist forces choked the narrow path.

The soldiers hunkered down behind the walls and shouted:

“Surrender and come out! We’ll treat you as prisoners!”

“Shut up! You fucking traitors! This is the spirit of Imperial soldiers!”

The troopers from the legitimate Imperial army tried to evacuate their dying comrades from the passage, but they were struck by bolts from deep within and were killed.

“Shit!”

“All right, I’ll go.”

The brave men who went forward to save their still-living comrades fell as casualties, and it looked like it would become a stalemate.

“Here. They’re in here!”

However, once the JSDF troopers showed up from the distance, surrounded by infantry, the situation changed rapidly.

The men within cursed and rejected all attempts to make them surrender. However, a certain sergeant said, “Really now. Good for you, then.”

He shrugged, and then threw in a flashbang grenade.

In such cramped quarters, the blinding flash and the tremendous shockwave stunned the defenders, knocking them out.

The soldiers of the Imperial army rushed in at once, capturing Zorzar’s men.

“Okay, that’s settled. Let’s move on.”

And so, the futile resistance of Zorzar’s men was steadily crushed.

Most sieges began by punching a hole in the walls or bypassing them, then gathering somewhere within the city. But this battle defied all conventional logic, and the battlefield encompassed the entirety of the city, with fleeing soldiers running in all directions. Thus, there were many things they had to do.

They had to sweep the battlefield of enemies, take prisoners, and if need be, conduct summary trials. They had to take control of storehouses containing rations, weapons and cash. They also needed to tend to the wounds of the injured and evacuate casualties for recovery, and then reorganize themselves into fighting order. They could not help but be occupied by these things.

“There were fewer defenders in Mare than expected,” Kengun said to Lieutenant Colonel Youga.

“Indeed. Even if they fled outside, it’s still too little.”

“Was our intelligence off, or are they all outside? This is very problematic.”

“Should we have them investigate?”

“Umu. Have them start questioning the prisoners.”

However, if they did so, they would end up on the back foot. Kengun decided to push the offensive to the next phase.

“Then, we’ll let Mymol-dono handle the cleanup work. King Duran’s second echelon, embark! We’re moving on to Fyue now!”

“Oh! Finally, it’s my time to shine.”

The soldiers of the Elbe Kingdom filed into the helicopters as their armor clanked and clattered. The helicopters had been refuelled, rearmed, and had received minor repairs.

“Quickly, quickly!”

King Duran, clad in a suit of heavy-looking full plate armor and with one artificial leg, helped the rest of his soldiers aboard the UH-1 helicopter. He sat with his ass hanging halfway off the central seat and looked around.

“Umu. It’s been a while, but it feels just like yesterday.”

“Your Majesty, have you ridden one of these before?”

A soldier handed a pear to the King, trembling as he asked the question.

Duran laughed loudly, and then took a big mouthful of the offered pear.

“Mm, it’s good,” he nodded. Then, he patted the nervous young man on the back.

“What, are you afraid?”

“Yes. This is my first time flying through the air.”

“It’s my second time. Don’t worry. Think of this as riding a boat in a rough current. There’ll be some shaking, but it’ll be fine as long as you’re prepared for it.”

Saying so, Duran patted the soldier’s shoulder once more.

“There’s no such thing as nobles or peasants on the battlefield. Leave your back to me and fight with all your heart.”

“Yes, I’ll give it my all.”

“Ohh. Put on a good show, then!”

“We’re taking off now! Hold on tight!”

The helicopter lifted as the pilot spoke. The soldiers went “Whoa, whoaaa!” as the body of the aircraft shuddered.

Watching this, King Duran laughed long and loud, like a child who had pranked someone.

And so, the helicopter squadrons set out to bring down the next fortress.

CHAPTER 9

In truth, Zorzar had learned that the legitimate Imperial army was amassing an army for an offensive quite some time back.

If his foe had sent written denunciations and other correspondence everywhere, that much would have been expected. However, even without that, Zorzar had a firm grasp of the timing and the scale of their operations from the way his enemy was gathering their forces and preparing for battle.

Naturally, this was because of the spies led by Bouro

However, this information was not something they had been aiming to obtain from the start. Rather, they had stumbled upon it by accident.

This was because their original aim had been to infiltrate Chateau Formal, but they had been discovered and apprehended instead. The spyhunters had worked backward from there and found their hiding places inside and outside the city, and as a result their painstakingly established spy network had been destroyed in the blink of an eye. After receiving the reports on that matter from Bouro, Tyuule agonized over the loss of their talented people and the need to replace them.

Common opinion held that money was all that was needed to hire people to do shady work like this, but that was not the case.

It was precisely because the work was shady that it attracted a lot of sloppy, crude and deviant people who could not hold down normal work otherwise.

Even a simple informant could betray them by leaking valuable information. In other words, sifting through gathered information was like panning for gold in river silt.

No, there was practically no gold to find in the first place. After all, they were the people who talked up simple rumors and unresearched conjectures as though they had stolen all sorts of treasure from the storehouses of the enemy.

Thus, the paymasters in charge of a spy ring had to be very strict.

They were given to dispensing appropriate rewards and punishments; lies and betrayal would be met with stern, cruel and frightening measures which were cold-blooded in the extreme and directed at their targets' weaknesses.

This inclination grew stronger the more these people realised the value of information. Most people would say, "It's done, pay up" after reporting news gained from listening around in an unguarded bar. It took a special kind of paymaster to gain leverage on people — be it through intimidation or some other cruel means — and tell them "You, go into the tiger's den and scout it out."

Punishing carelessness and betrayal aside, those people who found it hard to bear this guilt instead exaggerated their organization's strictness, ruthlessness and inhumanity in order to justify their actions. Such exaggerations were taken as the truth about spy rings by the general public, and thus espionage agents were often treated coldly by the world at large.

In order to understand why the members of a spy ring — organizations known for their insidious and inhuman nature — would paint their organization in such a manner, one would need to start by understanding the personalities of the people involved with such a business.

Reliable agents were like diamonds in the rough. Capable *and* reliable people were even more precious.

The word "reliable" referred to those who understood the significance of intelligence work, and who delivered their information without holding anything back. People like this often had a strong sense of belonging and loyalty to their society or people. They would not mess up or quit because it was painful or tiring, but strive hard for the sake of the greater good, their friends, and their families.

Capable people were those who could infiltrate the enemy and spy out their hidden abilities and resources.

Bouro was currently drawing his talent pool from the race called the Haryo.

Incidentally, there was no actual demihuman tribe known as the Haryo. This was not a fact known to the common man, but the word Haryo referred to the mongrel offspring that came from a world populated by numerous demihuman races.

Societies in this world were largely homogenous. Elves lived with elves, humans lived in communities of humans, and so on. However, all sorts of mixed-blooded beings were born, possibly due to interbreeding. Most of these offspring were raised by either their parents, but quite a few of them stood apart from these tribes, becoming the “Lost”.

There were many reasons for that, but the most common reasons were difficulties in living with others due to looking different and differences in lifespan. Thus, these “Lost” people banded together and forged a group identity, and soon they called themselves the Haryo.

Their line of thinking was: “Elves, humans, Dwarves or Warrior Bunnies, none of them were originally residents of this world. They were outsiders from other worlds. However, we’re different. We are the unique residents born to this world. We are truly native to this world. In other words, this world belongs to us.”

Nobody knew who started that line of thinking, but the Lost — who suffered and struggled in daily life — gradually united under the motto of “We are the master race”. That thought singlehandedly validated the disgust and hatred they felt towards everything around them.

People who were driven by such negative emotions had two paths to choose from; embrace reality and live openly in sin like the residents of Akusho, or cling to a delusion of false pride.

The Haryo were those who relied on a twisted form of democracy to reinforce their egos, and thus their vain glory.

However that, false pride was, as the name implied, ultimately false. This was because they had to claim that up was down and black was white.

The root of all this was the notion that “it was always someone else’s fault”. It was the idea that they could not be happy and prosperous because of other people. It put forward that because of society and the world, all the things which should have been rightfully theirs had been unjustly taken; no, had been stolen from them. However, that line of thinking only bred hatred. When one lurked in the dark and looked at those who lived proudly in the light with hateful eyes, it only intensified their feelings of guilt. Their anger and resentment intensified, and the Haryo looked for a way to vent their ever-swelling emotions.

It was Bouro who gave them a concrete means of ameliorating the guilt they felt.

“First, we will infiltrate the Empire from the shadows. Then, we will increase our station, and soon we will devour the Empire from the inside.”

One might call this a foolhardy aim, but the Haryo were hooked on the insidious idea of claiming the Empire from within. They gathered under Bouro’s banner and formed a secret society, gathered funds, trained the young, and began espionage activities.

Bouro succeeded in becoming Zorzar’s agent in the shadows. It might not have been official, but soon they were transformed into the Crown Prince’s intelligence apparatus.

However, they had lost many talented people as a result. This was not just a depletion of the Haryo’s strength, but it threatened to shake the very core of their sense of unity.

To break out of that, they plotted to use the Japanese kidnappees as bait for a trap.

But that failed too.

The trap they had set had instead been chewed through, and even the painstakingly-acquired bait had been taken.

They had not sneered at their foe. They thought of them as being on the level of griffins or sabertooth tigers, and devoted maniacal amounts of effort to laying a trap for them. But the enemy that did come for them was like unto an Ancient Dragon, which far outstripped their imaginations.

Even Bouro could do nothing but kowtow before Tyuule. And Tyuule, in turn, could only prostrate herself before Zorzar.

“...You should have thought of your opponents as entities of that level of power.”

In the past, Zorzar had thought of the Emperor and the pro-peace faction’s attitude towards Japan as being those of defeatists. However, he realized that he could no longer fault them for that anymore.

He had lost so badly that he could not even resent it. Or rather, he had grown so used to losing that he had abandoned all hope.

"No. I am not used to defeat or whatnot. Let this defeat be a lesson on what to do to fight the enemy, what to do in order to win. That defeat was not a defeat."

After cheering himself up, Zorzar ordered the Haryo (through Tyuule) to continue their intelligence operations.

However, there was no way to operate covertly and continue infiltrating the tiger's den due to most of their people having been wiped out. Therefore, they decided to have their reliable but not very capable people masquerade as traders. From there, they would buy and sell and also observe the changes in prices, thus spying on them from the outside.

This was not a very effective course of action, but it was better than doing nothing. They needed to buy themselves time to recruit and properly train reliable recruits.

However, their luck turned.

Perhaps the JSDF and House Formal had expended too much effort on hunting down those spies who took a direct approach, but posing as a merchant removed suspicion of being a spy, and they could come and go from Italica.

They watched with interest as the soldiers practiced at sliding down ropes. Apparently, one of them even asked, "What are they doing?"

The answer they got was, "Oh, this is practice for a new way of taking cities", without even an attempt at hiding it.

Then, they collated information on the delivery dates and quantities of arms, armor and rations from their daily banter with other merchants. From those, they could determine the operational plans of the legitimate Imperial Army.

The loyalist forces had not prepared much food. This implied that the enemy did not expect to fight for long, and from there they could surmise that the enemy was aiming for a series of quick battles.

In addition, the amount of horse fodder was an important clue as to how many horses they were committing to operations.

After Tyuule gave her report, Zorzar grew furious and interrupted her:

“Those damn traitors! They bring in foreign armies to fight me?! Looks like they’re not even trying to hide their true nature!”

The senators seated in the audience chamber shouted as well.

Said Count Woody: “Your Highness! We can finally add inviting foreign aggression to their tally of crimes!”

Baron Clayton added: “Since these people crave death, we shall give it to them!”

Then, Attorney-General Upson produced a copy of the letters sent from Italica and showed it to the senators.

“Everyone, please read this! The traitors have whored themselves out to the savages and recruited troops from them. All I can conclude from this is that the traitors have discarded their pride, not only as senators, but as Imperial nobles and even human beings!”

The senators studied the contents of the denunciation closely, and then they laughed.

“Are they such a degenerate lot? Then why fight us in the first place?”

“They are shameless indeed!”

“Well, that’s all you can expect of them. They’ve sold their country and their pride, all for the sake of filling their bellies and enriching themselves.”

“It pisses me off just to think that they used to be lords like me!”

After a round of hurling abuse, the senators looked back to Zorzar.

“Your Highness. War is inevitable at this point, but what exactly do you intend?”

"Umu. I intend to meet the enemy with all our might, and I hope I can count on you to lead your men as well."

As though anticipating those words, the militarily experienced senators nodded in excitement.

"There's no need to speak of what tactics to use. I've had many discussions in preparation for this day. The Empire's future rests on the upcoming battle. If you think a course of action will be effective, pursue it with all your might."

On Zorzar's command, courtiers unfurled a gigantic map which seemed to cover the entire floor. Generals Helm, Mutra and Karasta stood beside him, and Helm advanced, holding a swagger stick.

"The enemy intends a pincer attack on us from Arnus and Italica. Unfortunately, we can only surrender the fortresses Mare, Fyue, Rekki and so on to them."

"So we're abandoning them? Still, it can't be helped if it's for victory's sake."

After hearing the senators' questions, Helm pointed the tip of his swagger stick at the fortresses and nodded. Then, he swung it over to the Imperial Capital.

"Of course, our troops are fighting fiercely to weaken the enemy's fighting power. We have reinforced Mare with infantry and Fyue with Wyvern cavalry to meet the attack. However, we are the main force. Once the enemy grows overconfident and advances too deeply into our territory, it will be our turn to fight."

With that, Zorzar rose and said, "Listen well, everyone. I have a sure fire method of victory. I shall immediately take command of a unit to carry it out."

"Ohhh, the troops' morale will surely soar if your Highness personally takes the field."

"However, executing that stratagem will need some time. I urge you to think only of delaying the enemy at your posts, even for just a little."

Helm pointed at the forested areas outlined in brown and green. Those represented dangerous terrain, dark forests and treacherous ground.

“This is the absolute defensive line, where we will halt the enemy advance. It is anchored on Marais and its surroundings.”



The pro-war senators practically ran from the Crown Prince’s audience chamber in their excited rush to prepare for battle.

Furuta moved against the flow of people and looked around the chamber. Zorzar and his lackeys were already heading toward his office, while the courtiers were rolling up the map from the ground and tidying up.

Under the guise of pretending to see if the fruits in the corner of the audience chamber had gone bad, he silently studied the map. The essential elements of information (EEIs) which Furuta sought were what Zorzar was planning on doing. Would he stay here in Telta? Would he deploy? And if he did deploy, where would he be heading?

If Zorzar was not defeated, the war would not end. Therefore, he had to pinpoint Zorzar’s location.

However, he was a moment too late. The map was already rolled up and the courtiers were bringing it out of the room. Furuta was left alone on the room, and as he collected the overripe fruits — which looked like they would burst if they were so much as touched — he muttered:

“Why not assassinate Zorzar and be done with it?”

Of course, stabbing him or poisoning his food would be difficult, but if all he had to do was install a bomb onto his chair in the audience chamber, that would settle things quite neatly. He felt that it was far better than wasting lives in battle.

“That won’t work.”

However, Furuta’s thoughts were interrupted by the feminine voice which came from behind him.

“Assassination won’t solve anything. Even if you eliminate your political rivals through assassination, it won’t make the ruling afterwards any easier. Rather, it will

destabilize the situation. Somebody will take his Highness' place. Also, I will be the one to kill that man. I will not allow anyone else to do it."

He looked back, and saw Tyuule standing there.

"Tyuule-san?!"

"Marais."

"Marais?"

"Mm. His Highness is heading toward Marais. He said something about a sure fire method of victory."

"Is that really all right?"

Is it really alright to tell something like this to a man who claims to be an enemy spy? Furuta almost asked.

"It's fine. You already knew I intend to betray his Highness, right?"

As Tyuule said this, she tossed a small button-like object to Furuta. It was the microphone he had planted on Tyuule's body.

"I don't know how this device works, but it seems it can tell what the enemy is thinking, no? You put this on me, and you knew the battle of Tanska was a trap. Yet you went anyway."

"..."

It was not quite correct, but the observation was almost on the mark. Furuta shrugged.

"You probably don't know, but I wash everything I wear. Nobody will wash a demihuman's clothes in the Crown Prince's palace, especially not the clothes of a pleasure slave. So it wouldn't have helped even if you had paid off the washerwomen."

Furuta raised his hands in surrender. Then, he looked around to make sure there was nobody there before asking:

“Where’s that Bouro fellow?”

Tyuule stared at him, as though to say, “You even knew about him?”

“I had him run an errand for me, so for now it’s just the two of us. Also, let me get this out of the way first, Bouro isn’t human.”

“Ahh. A demihuman, then?”

Perhaps she was bothered by having to explain so much, but Tyuule did not bother elaborating.

“Still, why did you tell me that?”

“I want to make that man taste defeat. I want everything he tries to end in failure. Sure fire victory or whatnot, if nothing ends up going his way, he will be tormented by his powerlessness. I want him to feel how impotent he is and drown in despair. I will mock him for it, and then finish him off once and for all.”

Uwah... How much does Tyuule hate him?

A wave of cold swept through Furuta and he nearly groaned. He knew that she was capable of great hatred, but to think it was to that extent... That said, Furuta had heard of how she had come to be this way, so he felt that it was only to be expected. After all, she must have an extraordinary amount of hatred for the murderer of her siblings and close friends.

“I understand. I’ll leave that task to you then, Tyuule-san.”

“Mm, thanks. Although, you’re a pretty good spy yourself.”

“Good? Me?”

Furuta did not feel that he had excelled in any way, and he scratched his head to hide his embarrassment.

“Yes. I found it really hard to believe you were a spy. Up till now, Bouro still insists that you’re not one. Your acting was really convincing.”

“By acting, you mean...?”

“Oh, no need to play dumb. You’ve said so much, but you’re quite the thespian, Furuta.”

There seemed to be something like resentment in Tyuule’s words, but it felt like she was taking a shot at Furuta.

Furuta had no idea why she would do that, so he asked: “An actor?! Me?”

“Indeed. Because if you weren’t that way, then those lies... Maybe you’re the sort of person who can say that sort of thing without any compunction at all. If that’s the case, maybe you were born to be a spy.”

“Hang on a moment. For some reason, it feels like you’re scolding me.”

“I’m sorry if you feel that way. However, I’m the real idiot here.”

For just a moment, I’d thought that it would be okay if it were you. But I guess I was mistaken.

She could not say that, of course.

“What?”

She could not bring herself to say “When I thought of your dream, I was reminded of mine, Furuta.” So instead, she replied, “Forget it. I was just being foolish.”

“So, why did you say that?”

“Because all that stuff about your little restaurant was a lie too, right? You had me completely fooled.”

Furuta’s despondent reply interrupted hers.

“How dare you. How *dare* you!”

Furuta had declared himself to be a chef all his life. He had only become a spy by chance, because Zorzar had taken a shine to him.

“This might be a bit disrespectful to people who do this sort of thing for a living, but I have to say it anyway. I didn’t say I wanted to open my own place to deceive anyone!”

Tyuule realized that she had struck a nerve with Furuta, and she waggled her hands in panic.

“I’m sorry!”

“What do you mean, you’re sorry?! You call people liars, call people idiots, treat them like villains and jump to conclusions all on your own?! You’d better watch your tongue! I haven’t told a single lie ever since I came here! It’s just that nobody ever asked me if I was an enemy or a spy!”

Furuta’s anger overflowed, and he shouted at Tyuule.

Tyuule was fiercely proud despite being a slave, and she would not tolerate being shouted at by a mere chef. However, Tyuule was not angry, but ashamed. When she heard Furuta’s reply, it all came together.

This man had never once come off as shifty or come under suspicion of being a spy because he had never told a lie. It was because he had only told the truth that Zorzar trusted him and Bouro — a man with keen senses — was adamant that he was not a spy.

Are you a spy? Are you an enemy agent? Perhaps if she had asked those questions, things might have been different. But actually asking those questions to his face would have been foolish.

“Then, then... you weren’t lying about your shop? You really meant it?”

“That’s right. Thanks to this mission, I’ve got the seed capital for it, and I can open up my own place right away. At first, I was planning to invite you to help, even if I had to kidnap you to do it, Tyuule-san. But you disappointed me.”

“Eh?!”

“Tyuule-san, if you’re going to suspect people, then go suspect yourself!”

After those harsh words, Furuta pushed brusquely past Tyuule, as though she were nothing more than a hindrance, before leaving.

Tyuule stood there, frozen in place.

Soon, Bouro's voice came from the shadows.

"Tyuule-sama, I've returned... Is something wrong?"

Tyuule's looked like she was drunk as she replied:

"Quiet. Let me enjoy the lingering sound of his voice."

"Lingering... what do you mean? Did something happen?"

"Something *wonderful*," Tyuule muttered.



"Get ready to go before those damn traitors move out! Hurry!"

Helm, who had been appointed the highest commanding officer in the Imperial Army, rushed his men through their preparations.

The weapons and rations had come from Mutra, while their funds had been commandeered by Karasta from the nearby provinces and merchants. They had sent all the fighting strength they could gather from across the land to Marais, without holding anything back.

In addition, they were skirmishing around the outskirts of Italica and Arnus. These attacks were targeted at the units of the coalition, merchants and the resource prospectors.

"Then, we ought to be moving out soon."

After that, Zorzar and Helm selected 10'000 elite troops and set out from Delta.

"You even prepared a carriage?"

Tyuule, who was accompanying Zorzar, gasped in awe at the decorated interior.

“Umu. Those bastards who infiltrated the Empire seem to have used disguised cargo wagons. While the guards were completely taken in, it was still a good idea, so I had them prepare some.”

On the surface, it appeared to be a wagon carrying firewood and hay, but in truth, it was a carriage fit for a nobleman.

“You, take this one. I may join you in it from time to time. Oi, take a seat and see how it feels.”

Zorzar shoved Tyuule aboard as he said so.

“Do you mean want me to see how it feels to sit aboard this carriage? Or how it feels to have me sit on you?”

“Yes.”

In truth, visibility was poor from the disguised carriage, but it felt quite comfortable to ride in. Granted, their field of view was poor, but if one turned that around and said that they would not need to worry about being spied upon, then even that flaw vanished.

If there were any problems, it would be the soundproofing. Everyone outside could hear Tyuule’s lewd moans.

One could see soldiers disguised as farmers and merchants through the cracked-open door. However, it would seem her moans were giving them a hard time, judging by how often they peeked over at them. It was just too bad for them, considering that they would soon be fighting in bloody battle soon.

The Centaurs who made up the vanguard tilted their ears to listen, making no secret of doing so.

The soldiers broke up into smaller groups after the sun went down.

In the darkness of the night, the soldiers accepted the lead of the monsters — who had superior night vision — while travelling the forest paths and mountain trails which only the locals would know.

After satisfying himself of the comfort of the carriage, Zorral left, leaving Tyuule to mutter to herself while rearranging her clothing.

“Bouro... You’re following us, right?”

“Yes.”

Since he could not speak from under the bed, Bouro’s voice instead came from the driver’s seat. Somehow, he had changed places with the driver.

“The Empire’s been divided in half and they’re about to start murdering each other. Our hard work up till now has finally borne fruit.”

“Father, brother and sister, all killing each other. Whoever wins, the Empire loses. It will be very difficult for them to return to their previous prosperity.”

“Let’s push them a little to lengthen the chaos and increase the number of deaths. I’m quite interested in Zorral’s little secret. Can you help me find it out?”

“What will you do once I learn of it?”

“Tell Furuta.”

“Furuta the chef? What do you plan to do?”

“Make sure it gets to the enemy. That man is an enemy spy. Didn’t he flat-out say so?”

“Tyuule-sama, I don’t know how many times I’ve said this, but Furuta isn’t an enemy spy. He is simply saying that to deceive you.”

“Kukukukuku. What do you mean by deceiving me?”

“That Furuta fellow is in love with you, Tyuule-sama. So he is inventing a tall tale to keep your interest in him.”

“You really think so?! That man loves me... But even so... Still, yes. So what? There's no need to mind, right?”

“Still, you *have* lowered your guard against him, Tyuule-sama. That man speaks nothing but nonsense. Granted, his cooking really is good, but nothing he says make sense. He goes on and on about opening a restaurant and larders that chill food without ice and signboards which shine as bright as day and other such nonsense.”

“He's not lying!”

“...”

“He's an honest man. Someone like you wouldn't understand.”

“Please pull yourself together, Tyuule-sama. How could there be such an honest spy? In all honesty, you sounded like you've been taken in by him.”

“I know. I'll be careful. But Bouro, you must go and learn his Highness' secret. Understood?”

“It shall be done. However, once I leave your side, coming back will be somewhat difficult. Are you alright with that?”

The fact is that even the troops following them did not know where Zorzar was heading.

He had even gone so far as to personally hand over heavily-encoded orders to each unit. Not even their commanders would know where they were going until those soldiers who had been briefed with the decoding keys appeared at their doorstep.

In addition, they had practiced a cruel version of operational security by massacring every single person they had come across, be they travellers or residents. Thus, even his allies did not know the location of the main force which Zorzar led.

“No matter which way we go, our final destination ought to be Marais. Meet up with me there.”

“That means that until then, you'll be alone, Tyuule-sama.”

“It’s fine. If you can reveal Zorzar’s secret, we’ll be able to see him in absolute despair.”

“...His Highness will be in despair?”

“Correct. I want to see his disappointed face. Is that wrong?”

“Of course not. But Tyuule-sama, have you considered the consequences of that?”

“Why should I care?”

“...Indeed, there is no need for you to consider that. I hear and obey. I shall now do as you wish.”

With that, Bouro’s presence vanished.

Zorzar’s main force had started moving just as Italica’s allies had started mobilizing their own manpower.

In addition, the JSDF had been forced to deploy most of their reconnaissance elements to track down the areas with guerilla activity. Thus, the cameras on their recon planes had not spotted Zorzar’s forces moving in the rear echelons.



Marais was a land of precipitous peaks and foreboding forests.

The First Combat Group led by Colonel Kuze was progressing well, but they had encountered stiff resistance from the enemy in the forest.

Amidst the sounds of distant gunfire and earth-shaking artillery, Kuze emerged from his Type 82 command vehicle, looking through his binoculars at the source of the noise.

“So, they blocked it off, huh.”

“Yes. While we were trying to clear the obstacles, five ‘Scopeds’ came at us,” the frontline commander said over the wireless.

“Scopedom” was the nickname for armored Ogres among the JSDF. They resembled humanoid combat vehicles from a certain anime, and the name for them stuck. (TL Note: Armored Trooper VOTOMS.)

“So, how’s it going?”

“Just as we were about to sweep them with the heavy machine guns, the enemy fled back into the forest.”

“You should know, right? Don’t let your men pursue them.”

The feigned retreat to lure enemies into a waiting ambush was an age-old tactic. Then again, one could say that Zorral’s men had no other tactics to use. In addition, during this contact with the enemy, the main force was advancing to bypass Beza. The objective of this battle was to destroy Zorral. Fighting and annihilating the enemy was only a step in achieving that aim.

Still, they could not leave hidden enemies in the forest unattended. In order to remove their ability to mount any organized resistance, they had to reveal and destroy the ambushers.

“The enemy’s coming. Wake up your bloody ideas!”

Until now, the First Combat Group’s columns had been led by tanks, which destroyed the enemy’s scattered resistance as they advanced. However, it was hard for them to continue doing so in the poor visibility and unstable terrain of mountainous and forested regions. If they decided to employ human wave tactics in terrain like this which hampered movement, even the JGSDF would have a hard time.

In addition, the Scopeds were heavily armored.

Nothing short of .50 cal (fired by 12.7mm machine guns) rounds could bring them down. They were quite dangerous to the average infantryman, who only carried a Type 64 rifle. Then, what could they do? The best option was to tear apart their cover and reveal them. To achieve that aim, they conducted reconnaissance in force.

The sounds of mortars firing and mortar bombs exploding echoed from everywhere. The impact points changed constantly, guided by the telemetry from an OH-1 reconnaissance helicopter



“Colonel. All units have been contacted by the enemy. We’re in a combat situation.”

“Umu. Make sure you keep the lines of communications clear.”

Men could only see what was ahead of them. The most dangerous situation for them would be if they were engaged by the enemy in front and behind. Thus, they could not let the enemy through. Even so, it was hard to deal with guerillas, regardless of how advanced one’s technology and weapons were.

They would fight off the enemy’s attacks, run them down as they fled and root them out of their hiding places, then rain down artillery fire and destroy their ability to function as a coordinated group before mopping up the survivors. This was broadly comparable to “de-lousing”, and it was the only way to be assured of victory against guerillas and special forces.

(TL Note: the word used is 虱潰, i.e. the systematic and thorough removal of lice)

The infantrymen advanced slowly through the forest, rifles at the ready.

“The Scopedogs have come out to play. Ready grenades!”

With a whoosh, an arrow flew out at a trooper who was distracted by pulling out a grenade in response to his squad commander’s orders.

The man went down, and his friends proceeded to return fire. After that, an Imperial trooper leapt down from a tree.

As if on cue, the Imperial troopers who were lying prone on the ground while covered with leaves leapt up as one, savage, murderous looks on their faces.

This was close combat, fought at ranges measured in yards.

The JSDF troopers stood firm, firing away into the enemy which charged them without regard to their losses.

When the machine gun swept across the enemy line, the effect was like a chainsaw ripping away at a tree’s bark and sending the chunks flying away.

The Giant Ogres revealed themselves, sheathed from head to toe in heavy steel armor. Several huge humanoids wielding equally huge clubs approached the troopers

“The Scopeds aren’t fast! Don’t panic, fall back slowly and fire grenades!”

The troopers fell back as one. On the command of “Fire!” they launched their grenades.

Not all of them hit. However, the armored Ogres were still drowned in a wave of explosions and went down.

Of course, not every engagement went that smoothly.

There were soldiers who entered the enemy’s kill zone, and ended up being flanked and destroyed by Ogre clubs. However, the overall encirclement was solid and slowly shrinking, and the Empire’s organized counterattacks began faltering.

Kuze turned to ask his executive officer, who was studying a map, “Have we verified the enemy’s position?”

“Yes. The enemy isn’t scattering, but advancing to a single location, somewhere between the closest and next closest peaks on the forward left front. They seem to be planning to lure us in there.”

After drawing the axes of the enemy’s retreat on the map, they formed an intersection in the valley between what was designated Peak One and Peak Two. After considering their movement speed...

“Hit them with arty in five to six minutes’ time,” Kuze said as he tapped at the map.

“It’ll be more effective if we can narrow the bombardment radius. We’ll have a Ninja confirm.”

(TL Note: The OH-1 is nicknamed “Shinobi”; the text uses OH-1 but the furigana is “Shinobi”)

The OH-1 orbited overhead. The artillery gunners recomputed their impact points based on the information it supplied.

“Commence bombardment!”

The Type 75 155mm Self-Propelled Howitzers opened fire, and every round they sent downrange was packed with the equivalent of 7 kilos of TNT. Said rounds rained

down on the valley. The bombardment set the forest ablaze, and the shockwaves threw up chunks of earth and stone like someone was stirring up the very land. Most of the Imperial soldiers caught in this lost their lives, while the ones who had miraculously survived began an actual retreat. This was not an organized movement to draw the enemies into a trap, but a flight for their lives.



“Count Woody, the enemy has come,” Baron Clayton panted as he and his scouts surmounted a hill near Beza.

“Ahh, the iron dragonflies are flying too.”

They looked up, and saw that the recon helicopter was looking down upon them from a height that bows and catapults could never reach.

Only the count and some of his men were on the top of the hill.

Count Woody thought, *How does this place look from the air? Can they see me? If they can see me, then how do I look in their eyes?*

“Many of the enemy are riding in metal boxes.”

The land here was nothing but boulders and the weeds which grew between them. A path had been cut through the terrain, as though to split open the wilderness, and the enemy was travelling along it.

“Umu. I see them now.”

Indeed, Count Woody had a direct view of the enemy as they drew close.

After verifying the reports from his scouts, Woody ordered, “Just as expected. Commence the operation!”

Beza was south of Marais, roughly a day’s travel by horse.

It was an important travel passage If the enemy wanted to bypass the strongpoint of Marais.

Woody gave orders to the soldier beside him.

“Listen up. Haste makes waste. Repeat and emphasize to the soldiers that they must wait for orders.”

The clattering of armor trailed the man as he ran down the slope. Each step threw up pebbles and dust as he broke into a sprint. Then, he suddenly fell flat to the ground and shouted, “Don’t be hasty! Wait for orders!”

Then, he stood up, and ran somewhere else.

At a closer look, the earth was cracked there. And if one looked into that dark space, they would find several pairs of eyes shining back.

“Wait for orders!”

This was not like Marais where there was a forest for them to hide. However, there were huge boulders everywhere and the terrain was uneven. Woody planned to use them as weapons.

With the aid of Goblins and Trolls, they had excavated large trenches in the ground and piled vast quantities of dirt and mud on top of them to deceive the eyes in the sky. He had then ordered his men to hide within. Once the enemy was fully engaged, they would ambush them.

Naturally, this was not limited to just one or two locations. Trenches like these covered Beza, and roughly 10'000 men and monsters were hidden in them.

Their plan was to lure the enemy into overextending themselves deep into their formation before falling on them at once and turning it into a chaotic melee.

However, something took place that Woody had not expected.

What the Imperial soldiers called “metal boxes” left the road and charged straight at the trenches.

One of them broke through the trench’s camouflage and fell in.

They had lured the enemy into a pitfall. They could have proudly declared the success of their tactic if this had been their aim from the start. However, it was precisely because they had not expected the enemy to fall into the trench that the hidden Imperial troops were briefly paralyzed by indecision and did not react. In addition, since they had been repeatedly warned not to take independent action and wait for a signal, both sides ended up blinking at each other.

The JGSDF servicemen thought they had fallen into a trap and shouted, “What?! What happened?!” Then, as they dismounted from their Type 87 reconnaissance and patrol vehicle (RCV), they found that the “trap” was full of enemy soldiers and they were shocked.

“Ah...”

“Ah.”

Something like this had happened in World War 2. The Americans allowed what they thought to be friendlies to get close, but they were actually German troops. Both sides parted ways without combat, because they had assumed each other to be friendlies. Thus, when they got a close look at each other and realised they were enemies, they were at a loss for what to do. In the end, they brushed past each other continued on to their respective destinations.

Now, the Imperial soldiers in the trench and the JSDF troopers were experiencing something similar.

One of the JSDF troopers raised a hand and went, “Ah, hi.”

Following which, an Imperial soldier raised a hand and confusedly responded with an, “Ah, yes.”

Clearly, both sides were baffled.

However, a light armored vehicle drove by and the commander within shouted, “What the fuck are you doing?!”

That broke the stupefied mood in the air.

“Idiots! They’re the enemy! Fire! Fire!”

The orders snapped the JSDF troopers back to their senses and they pulled their triggers. The sounds of their gunshots brought the nearby Imperial troops out of hiding, and thus the skirmish began.

Count Woody gnashed his teeth from his perch atop the hill.

“Gods dammit!”

“What should we do, Count?”

“What else can we do?! Fight! Fight hard!”

In accordance with Count Woody’s orders, the ambushing Imperial troops rushed out at once. They had failed to completely encircle the enemy, but the plan of forcing them into hand-to-hand combat had not yet failed.

“Forward! Forward!”

As the bullets began raining down, the battering rams disguised as rocks were rolled out.

Wagons piled high with kindling were lit and then rolled down the slopes in unison. Monsters that looked like war elephants and rhinos emerged from the trenches, pounding the ground underfoot with mighty thumps, and they exuded a fearsome presence as they pushed forward.

Fire wagons, battering rams, and then hordes and hordes of monsters surged forward.



Goblins and Trolls swarmed onto the Type 74 MBTs like ants, climbing onto their main guns. Then, they hacked with their swords at the sturdy armor plating that was designed to repel anti-tank rounds, making a shrill, screeching noise. They destroyed everything they could, like searchlights and so on.

“Enemies everywhere!”

“R-Requesting support! We can’t fight back!”

Wails of panic came over the wireless from the tanks, who were defenseless once their enemies got close. Some of them were driving around wildly, in an attempt to shake off their attackers.

While some of the enemies clinging on to them were shaken off, it brought them out of formation, and they were swallowed up by the enemy troops.

The JSDF troopers were shocked at the massive amount of enemies who had appeared before their eyes all of a sudden, and all they could do was fire wildly at the foes before them.

“Don’t panic. Stay calm. Don’t try to shake them off. Let your allies kill them!”

After hearing their commander’s calm voice, the troopers swiftly regained their composure.

However, the densely-packed waves of battering rams, war elephants and rhinos did not let up. They crashed into the flanks of the armored vehicles with bone-crunching force, making the vehicles shudder. Armor plates were deeply dented and the troopers within were tossed out. The men hastily reorganized into fighting squares to gun down the enemies which rushed in to take advantage.

Type 60 Self-Propelled Recoilless Guns fired, and the rhinos hit by them collapsed like they had been winded and breathed their last.

The Type 74 main guns roared, and the hordes of Goblins clinging to them were blasted several meters away.

Even so, the Imperial Army continued to leverage on their superior numbers and enveloped the JSDF forces.

“Good! Forward, forward, march the men forward! We must hold the line until Zorzał-denka arrives!”

Zorzał said he had a sure fire way of victory. All Woody could do was believe in that, and lock the enemy down here, no matter what.



Countless Wyverns waited within the caves dug into the narrow passes.

All of them were fitted with saddles and barding, their riders lying flat on top of them, holding their breath as they awaited their commanders' order.

Commander Podawan mopped at the sweat which kept beading on his bald head, and kept an eye in the direction of the horizon from his place near the cave entrance.

The enemy's' scouts had very sharp eyes. He did not know how they did it, but if they revealed themselves, even if just a little, they would be found and attacked. Thus, Podawan had ordered his men and his Wyverns to be covered in mud. The Wyvern riders naturally resented this, given that they were a proud lot and they were literally painting their faces with mud. However, they had to bear with it for the sake of victory. (TL Note: The JP saying is 顔に泥を塗る, "painting one's face with mud" or disgracing oneself)

An aerial reconnaissance Wyvern orbited high in the sky.

After being spotted by the enemy's scouts, it gyrated wildly in the air and frantically flew up and down.

“Looks like it's been spotted.”

The Wyvern fell. However, in the fleeting moment before it hit the ground, it managed to flash a message using reflected sunlight. This was a signalling method they had developed from their experience in defending the Imperial Capital's airspace.

“Count Podawan. Four flashes, and then four flashes again.”

“Umu. Enemy approaching, then. I salute his ability to complete his mission even on the verge of death. Listen up, everyone. This may be the site of our last battle. If they break through here, we're done. May that stiffen your resolve! Move out now!”

The Wyverns spread their wings as one.



“Your Majesty, we’ll be able to see Fortress Fyue soon,” the co-pilot told King Duran.

The helicopters of the Fourth Combat Group transited from the plains into the highlands that were ringed by mountainous forests. It flew between the steep peaks. The fortress would be located somewhere ahead, in order to block the pass.

The troopers stuck their bodies out, looking at the receding green of the forests.

“Amazing,” they breathed, marvelling at their speed. Now that they were used to the view from above, they could be properly impressed by the awesome spectacle that was flight.

Even Duran found it hard to control the swelling in his chest as he beheld that magnificent sight.

“All right, we’ll show those Imperials our might!”

He could not help but clutch the hilt of his sword tightly.

“Mm? What’s wrong?”

However, swarms of Wyverns boiled out of the narrow peaks to either side of them.

“Watch out!”

Waves of nets made of chain links fell from the sky. Although most of them missed their mark, some of them managed to tangle up the propellers of several helicopters. These helicopters lost their lift and stability, spinning wildly around as they descended rapidly.

“What happened!?”

It was all the troopers could do to hang on to something within the wildly shaking cabin in order not to be thrown out. One of them glimpsed the enemy and shouted: “It’s Zorzal’s Wyvern riders!”

Shots came from all around them, and the helicopters swerved back and forth to avoid being hit.

“Your, your Majesty! Is, is, is this really all right?!” shouted a soldier as he clung to his seat to avoid being thrown off.

“The hell should I know?! Don’t talk, you’ll bite your tongue!”

That was all Duran could say. After all, this was not just a matter of turbulence.



“All right, the ambush worked! Bring them all down at once!”

As Podawan gave his order, the Wyvern riders pounced on the helicopter squadron.



After Zorzar’s ten thousand men formed up, they donned their armor, distributed weapons, formed up in ranks, and resumed the look of a proper army before marching out.

Initially, their marching order had resembled a serpent, but after reaching the plains, they had spread like floodwaters spilling over a dyke. The soldiers left the path and opened up their formation.

“All ranks! Right turn!”

The sub-commanders echoed the command with shouts of “Carry on!”, and the infantry turned like an intricate machine, changing their formation from that of a snake into squares. They took dressing from their flagbearers and formed ranked spear lines with their shields perfectly aligned, marching in unison like a single organism.

“Adjust formation!”

Upon hearing Mutra’s order, these fighting squares lined up, like the black and white grid of a chessboard.

Helm and Mutra were in Zorzar's command unit. Karasta and his men followed them, trailing the flagbearers who carried the Imperial flag, the Imperial Army's flag, the Crown Prince's flag, and various other colorful banners. In addition, the signallers and battle musicians were with them.

The disguise on Tyuule's wagon had been discarded, and a noble's carriage now travelled beside Zorzar.

"Zorzar-sama. Is this really Marais?" Tyuule asked in puzzlement.

They should have been heading toward a region of steep cliffs and grim forests, but the land here was flat and green as far as the eye could see. Her surprise was only to be expected.

However, Zorzar replied: "Who said we were going to Marais?"

"Ah?"

"I merely said we had a sure fire way to win, but I never said we were going to Marais."

The pro-war generals and soldiers were currently fighting for their lives at Marais because they believed Zorzar would save them. But why was that? Tyuule could not hide her confusion and worriedly asked:

"...Then, where is this?"

"Italica, of House Formal's domain. Look."

Zorzar's troops had marched across the mountains in formation.

And then, the land opened up before them, and on the other side of the gentle slope they could see the town of Italica.

"This is the weakness of the enemy. If we bring down the enemy's stronghold and seize the Emperor, then we have won. That is my sure fire means of victory."

"We have caught the enemy unawares. Lions and dragons have keen eyes and noses, but they can only see forward when they're stalking their prey. This allows us an opening which we can exploit," one of Zorzar's commanders said.

Helm responded on Zorzar's behalf.

"As you can see, Italica is undefended. That makes our task an easy one. Ideally, we would have launched an attack before they built up a defense," he said. "It would be even better if we could have rushed in before the city gates were closed, but that would be too much to ask for, so we couldn't count on that. After all, the enemy aren't mindless marionettes."

Thus, the best strategy was an assault. If they could swiftly scale the walls while the enemy was confused, they would be able to take the keep and moat, despite some losses.

"I don't want to waste too much time on this."

"Yes, sir. If this drags on too long, the enemy's main body will return."

That was the main reason why they could not drag their feet. Helm's challenge was to take the keep within a short period of time.

Of course, Zorzar had not planned to bet everything on Helm. His intention was to match his scheme with a frontal attack, to boost the chances of success.

"Bouro... I'll leave capturing the Emperor to you."

The driver of Tyuule's carriage turned towards him.

"Ha, kuhihihih. This battle is the decisive one for us. I shall throw the full might of the Haryo people into this."

"Bo-Bouro! Why are you here?"

Bouro should not have been here.

"Answer me, Bouro. Why are you here?"

Bouro shrunk away as Tyuule spoke, while Zorzar and Helm chuckled coldly.

"Tyuule. Tell me, what is so inconvenient about having Bouro around?"

She shuddered at Zorzar's question.

"N-nothing."

"You were nothing more than a point of contact with Bouro. I've been saying that from the beginning. Now, I am assuming direct control and relaying my orders in person. What is wrong with that?"

Tyuule violently shook her head.

"Did you feel Bouro could not be here because you wanted him to overhear something?"

"No, no. No-nothing of that sort."

"Don't lie to me. When I heard you were betraying me, I was shocked too. I found it hard to sleep, and I was so angry that I even took it out on my slaves. I killed a few, if I'm not wrong."

Zorzar's words grew angrier as he continued speaking.

"What a tragedy, don't you think? How sad. Those poor, sad slaves. I even killed the women. That was how angry I was."

Tyuule held her breath.

Zorzar dismounted from his horse, and slowly walked towards Tyuule's carriage.

Petrified with fear, Tyuule could not move. Zorzar reached out and pulled her out.

"Your, your Highness, it's not like that."

"Enough of that. Be quiet. Shut up. Shut up!"

"Ahh, your Highness, please believe me—"

"Didn't I tell you to shut up!"

Zorzar's furious shout set Tyuule trembling, and she shut up. Then, Zorzar smiled smugly.

"Come to think of it, I did betray you too. After all, when I heard your wish to save your tribe, not only did I not fulfil it, I destroyed it. I was the one who captured your friends, your people, and sold them all as slaves. And I never once mentioned it. When would you find out? What kind of face would you make when you found out? Would you sigh in despair? Would you demand answers of me in anger? The thought of seeing you like that set my heart racing. Would you murder me in my sleep? Would you approach me with a hidden knife? I was looking forward to something like that all this time."

"That, that sort of thing—"

"But no matter how long I waited, you didn't react. You looked like you didn't care, so I put the documents detailing the fate of your race in places where you could see. Things like how many bunnies I sold, and so on. You read them, right? You should have read them, didn't you?"

"Hiiii..."

"Even then, you didn't change your attitude. So I was deceived. I thought you were in love with me. I thought you had decided to forget your pain and anger. I thought you were a cold, cruel woman. In truth, I was terribly disappointed. But then, I realised that I had a very useful slave in my hands, so I let you off. You cheered me up when I was hurt and helped me regain my confidence. You did anything to make me happy. And it did make me happy. I took those to be your true feelings. I trusted you. I gave you a lot of responsibility. And you betrayed me. How should I punish you for that?"

"You never trusted me. You were simply looking down on me. I have no reason to repay your trust."

Tyuule pulled at Zorzar's arm with desperate speed, but it was thick and brawny, so she was the one pulled back instead.

"That's right. That's how it should be. You have the right to hate me. You have the right to point your blade of vengeance at me. Your anger is righteous. However, the way you showed it was wrong. You betrayed me. You betrayed my expectations, and then you betrayed my trust. And now, you were about to betray me as well. How did you end up in such a pathetic state, Tyuule? Someone like you shouldn't beg for their life

when their treachery is revealed, but show a more dignified side of themselves, no? You beg for your life, and when that doesn't work you shout at me? What a shameful display."

"And why do I have to meet your expectations?"

"Ah? Say that again?!"

"Like I said, why do I have to meet your expectations?" Tyuule shouted. It felt like she was trying to slap him with her voice. Even Zorzar frowned,

"...I see, I see. So you mean that you were planning to take revenge on me by betraying my expectations, then."

"Correct. I will never move as you expect of me!"

"Kuku, then let's see how far you can keep betraying my expectations. I want to see how long that stubbornness of yours holds out!"

After that, Bouro got down from the carriage and bowed.

"Kuhiihiihiihiihiihii, your Highness. I beg you to give this bunnygirl to me."

"Of course. I don't wish to have my troops tired out before the battle. People like you will do just fine."

Not everyone on the battlefield was a soldier. People like Zorzar had runners and servants trailing them. Bouro had taken all these slaves under his wing.

"Oi, what the hell are you doing?"

"I want to see you cry and beg for mercy. I want to see you scream 'Hurry up and kill me already'."

Upon that signal, seven to eight men, led by Bouro, approached her.

Upon seeing their lascivious gazes, Tyuule swallowed as she realised what would happen to her, and boldly shouted. "Hmph! As if that many would be enough. If you

want to make me beg, bring ten times the amount, Zorzar. And if they're all the same size as your crude little prick, then you'll need a hundred times as much!"

"What, what did you say?"

Even Zorzar was stunned by her words.

"I'm not that..."

Crude, he wanted to say. But Tyuule shouted to drown him out:

"If I'm wrong, then drop your pants right now and show it to me! I'll compare them all to yours! After all, you' shrivel up after squeezing it once or twice, right? If you want to make me cry for mercy, you'd better bring more! Even if you say, 'please stop, I can't do it any more', I won't let you off! So you'd better prepare yourselves! I'll drain you all so dry you won't even be able to get hard when you see a woman anymore!"

Perhaps they were repulsed by this woman, but the men backed off as one, clutching their groins as Tyuule's presence crushed them.

Someone muttered, "Shit, she's scary. She might really suck us dry."

Even Zorzar backed off as he realized that.

"Your Highness. Now is not the time for this sort of thing," General Karasta said.

This was a rare opportunity. A defenceless city stood before them, and the troops were awaiting Zorzar's order.

If they wasted time here, Italica would be able to mount a proper defense.

And as expected, the city gates opened and troops streamed forth. At a closer look, they had their backs to the city. It would seem they were preparing to mount a line formation.

"Cheh," Helm and his officers scoffed.

"The traitors intend to take the field against us?"

Helm looked over to Zorzar and shouted, "Your Highness! We can still make it. Please order an attack immediately! If we manage to execute a surprise attack before they fully form up, the enemy will be unable to fight back. Thrown into disarray, they will retreat into the city. It's not what we hoped for, but it's still favorable to us."

However, Zorzar shook his head.

"No, wait. If they want to fight an open-field battle, then we shall oblige. It'll be faster than a siege, after all."

The fact was that sieges were not only time-consuming, but would result in many casualties. Even if they committed to one, there was no guarantee that they would win. In contrast, an open-field battle favored the side with greater numbers.

Numbers were the fundamental element of determining fighting strength. Upon those you had force multipliers like weapon quality, combat tactics, terrain, troop morale, the quality of the chain of command, and so on.

The most important of these force multipliers was the fortifications offered by a castle.

With that as a linchpin of a well-thought out defense, even a large army would have a hard time winning a siege. They should be thanking the heavens that they had decided to abandon that advantage for open battle.

Zorzar's forces and Italica's forces were roughly even when it came to weapon quality and their chain of command. Thus, the key factors would be tactics, troop morale, and troop quantity. Since they far exceeded the enemy in numbers, Zorzar concluded that a field battle would be quite reasonable.

Attorney-General-to-be and Head Oprichniki Upson said, "General Helm, as you can see, the enemy numbers 6'000 while our forces number 10'000. Even a head-on clash should prove to be in our favor."

Karasta and Mutra agreed with that assessment. They summoned the buglers and had them give the order to prepare for a field battle.

The horns of the buglers echoed all around. The soldiers cast aside their siege equipment and reorganized their formation.

They shifted from a siege formation to one better suited for open field combat. The archers and the shield-bearing infantry exchanged positions.

The men drew their swords, braced their lances, drew their bows, and steeled themselves for a field battle.

“Tyuule, after this battle is over, I’ll give you ten times the number of men, as you hoped for. You can look forward to it! Bouro, I’ll deal with Tyuule later. First, lock her up somewhere. The Emperor’s more important than that. This should be easier than trying to take their keep. Failure will not be tolerated!”

“Yes, I understand.”

Bouro had his men tie up Tyuule and bowed to Zorzar.

“Then, let the battle begin.”

Zorzar raised his finger as a signal. Helm saw this and gave an order.

“Forward!”

Horns rang all round.”

“Forward — march!”

The soldiers marched forward with wordless coordination, and the sound of pounding caligae rang forth. They slowly advanced, their shields in one hand and their swords or spears in the other.

(TL Note: カリガ = caliga = Roman combat boots that look like sandals)

In contrast, the legitimate Imperial army remained motionless in front of Italica.

Perhaps they had elected a defensive stance due to their fewer numbers.

“But if they’re on the defensive, then why did they come out?”

Helm muttered to himself, as though cursing the stupidity of their commander.

“First rank, jog!”

At this command, the buglers’ horns echoed throughout the formation.

The foremost line of soldiers immediately quickened their pace.

The distance between the two frontlines shrank in an instant. A startling number of arrows spewed forth from the backlines of both armies, almost blotting out the sun for an instant, and then they fell like rain on their opposite numbers.

“Testudo!”

The soldiers raised their shields above their heads to protect themselves.

Arrows thudded into the oblong shields, and the arrowheads which penetrated wounded the arms on the soldiers.

Shouts and groans of pain came from all around, and the men who had taken arrows to the body and the knee through the gaps of their shields went down, one after the other.

“Break formation! Advance!”

Zorzel’s forces advanced again.

As the distance between the two armies shrank, they could now see each others’ faces. It was only then that Zorzel’s men realised that the people before them were not human, but composed of troops from various species.

“Charge!”

The soldiers readied their swords, braced their spears, and a vicious melee began.

Steel clashed against steel, and sparks flew off blades.

The hafts of thrusting spears bent and snapped, and shields were shattered by battle axes.

Heads were crushed with the helmets upon them, and the blood of soldiers flowed across the land and splattered everywhere. Roars of anger blended with cries of pain, and naked violence became a storm that swept across the battlefield.

“Vanguard, change!”

The centurions sounded their horns, and the men at the head of the formation swapped places with the soldiers waiting behind them. As though in response, the enemy brought their frontline to the rear as well.

Was it their blood, or that of the enemies? Whatever it was, it covered the bodies of the soldiers who fell back through the gaps in their fellows' ranks. They were replaced by fresh troops, who began the slaughter once more. They hammered, threw, hacked and deflected. The sounds of destruction rang forth.

“Fuck! Why are we fighting Dwarves?!” Zorzar’s men wailed.

This was a collision of strength against strength, an exchange of blows, a mutual murder. Throughout this melee, the short yet stout Dwarves swung their axes with enough force to split the ground open. They threw their entire weight into their strikes, so even though they were clumsy, in an intense melee, they hit hard enough to smash away several people at once. Dwarves were thus excellent combatants in this sort of face-to-face slugging match.

Zorzar’s offensive finally ground to a halt in the face of the outnumbered yet overpowering Dwarves.



“Pina-denka’s flag had been sighted in the enemy camp!”

Zorzar arched his right eyebrow as he heard the scout’s report. Given Pina’s personality, he had expected her to lead from the front, so he was quite surprised.

“What? Their commander is Pina?”

“Yes.”

“Helm. Can you still fight?”

Helm was one of the founding members of Pina's knight band. The fact that he had risen to this level could be attributed to the foundation he had gained in the knight band.

"There's no better foe for me than Pina-denka. If I don't fight well, Pina-denka will reprimand me."

Zorzar chuckled as he heard this.

"Really now. Then, show Pina your strength in full."

"Yes sir!"

Helm nodded and said to the signallers: "Continue rotating in fresh troops! Cavalry! Centaurs! Forward!"

The trumpets sounded again.

"Retreat 100 steps!"

As they heard this, the frontline troops ran off in an instant.

The Dwarves left their formation to pursue, lost in the thrill of battle.

However, they were ponderous and clumsy, and could not catch up with the Imperial forces.

No matter how hard they ran, the distance between them only grew further. They were panting, tired and their formation was in ruins. Thunder rumbled under the Centaurs and cavalry, and they charged them from the flanks, lances ready.

The Dwarves were immediately knocked over by the lances and sent flying by their hooves.

AFTERWORD

My sincere condolences to the victims of the Tohoku Earthquake. I pray they will recover soon and live a peaceful and happy life.

It happened on 11th March, 23rd Heisei year (Year 2011). At that time, I was walking from Nakano to Koenji. When I saw the vending machine before me shudder, I wondered, "Is the vending machine broken?" Shortly after, the trees lining the street shook, and a great crash came from the high-rise buildings. At that time, I thought, "The earthquake they said would hit the east has finally come". Roof tiles fell, some houses collapsed, and the exterior of some high-rise buildings fell off. The glass in shopfronts shattered, the street lights in front of the bus stations fell, and many people were injured.

Still, it was not much worse than what I saw, and when I went home, not knowing where the epicenter of the earthquake was or how intense it had been, I thought, "Ahhh, that's good, that's all there was."

However, that was not the case. Ibaraki Prefecture in the northeast was closer to the epicenter and it was not only hit by the earthquake, but by the resulting tsunami. This caused unspeakable devastation. Many lives and hopes and dreams were cut short as a result.

In addition, that was not the end of the disaster. The aftereffects have spread through our lives in various ways. Of course, it is nothing compared to the suffering of the people caught up in it, mere trivial matters, but they can hardly be written off as something small.

The manuscript for the final volume of Gate: Thus the JSDF Fought Here : [4 : Underworld] was completed on 7th March.

I have already penned the closing words and sent it to the publisher. It added up to 618 pages. Currently, I'm still thinking "So it's over already?" The problem is the earthquake which comes up in the last third of the volume and the resulting scenes of devastation. I was thinking, "Is it really okay to print something like that at a time like this?" Therefore, after contacting the publishers, we decided to split the first two-

thirds and the final third into separate volumes, edit them and then publish them separately.

And so, the book has ended up like this. The problem still lies in the final third, but I want to share it with you when the time is right.

Many people have said, "Good luck", so I will not repeat myself now.

However, things will surely get better. It's a pity that there are no protagonists who will say, "It's fine, leave it to me!" in real life, but in contrast, all the branches of the JSDF, the police, the coast guard, the politicians, the local people, the employees of related companies, as well as various volunteers are all thinking of a way to deal with this problem.

Let us put our hopes in them, and hold out just a bit longer.

Yanai Takumi

